



DISCOVERING THE OLMECS

AN UNCONVENTIONAL HISTORY

DAVID C. GROVE

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Discovering the Olmecs



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Discovering the Olmecs

An Unconventional History

BY DAVID C. GROVE

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Contents

Preface vii

1. The Olmecs Come to Light 1
2. The Tulane Expedition and the Olmec World (1925–1926) 5
3. The First Excavations: Tres Zapotes (1938–1940) 17
4. Stone Heads in the Jungle (1940) 31
5. Fortuitous Decisions at La Venta (1942–1943) 37
6. Monuments on the Río Chiquito (1945–1946) 50
7. The Return to La Venta (1955) 56
8. Of Monuments and Museums (1963, 1968) 69
9. Adding Antiquity to the Olmecs (1966–1968) 80
10. Research Headaches at La Venta (1967–1969) 90
11. Reclaiming La Venta (1984 to the Present) 99
12. San Lorenzo Yields New Secrets (1990–2012, Part 1) 104
13. El Manatí: “Like Digging in Warm Jell-O” (1987–1993) 116
14. “They’re Blowing Up the Site!” Tres Zapotes after Stirling
 (1950–2003) 126
15. An Olmec Stone Quarry and a Sugarcane Crisis (1991) 138
16. Discoveries Large and Small at San Lorenzo (1990–2012,
 Part 2) 151

17. The Night the Lights Went Out (2001) 161

18. Some Thoughts on the Archaeology of the Olmecs 166

Bibliographic Essay 183

Index 195

Preface

I made my first trip to Mexico in 1955, the same year that Philip Drucker and Robert Heizer carried out their excavations at La Venta's Complex A. I traveled throughout Mexico with a college friend in an old truck, camping along the way. He wanted to see Mexico because he wanted to be an archaeologist. I knew nothing about Mexican archaeology, but went because I wanted to travel. We visited lots of archaeological sites and met many wonderful people. I fell deeply in love with Mexico, its peoples, and its prehistory. I eventually changed careers and became an archaeologist, a move I have never regretted. My college friend? I heard he went to work for Xerox.

I taught at the University of Illinois for over thirty years and carried out archaeological research focused on the 1500–500 BC time period in the highlands of Central Mexico. The majority of those investigations took place at the site of Chalcatzingo, 70 miles south of Mexico City. Chalcatzingo has spectacular Olmec-like stone monuments that date to c. 700–500 BC. The results of that research were published in the book *Ancient Chalcatzingo* (University of Texas Press, 1987).

The Olmecs have been a special interest of mine throughout my career, and I frequently made trips to the Olman region to visit archaeological projects, update myself on new discoveries, and sometimes just relax with my friends and swap stories about our research and adventures. I have incorporated many of those stories into this book.

Numerous people have provided me with ideas, stories, and photos for the book, including Will Andrews, Philip Arnold, Michael Coe, Ann Cyphers, Dick Diehl, Bill and Barbara Fash, Susan Gillespie, Rebecca González, John Graham, Rosemary Joyce, Charles Knight, Michael Loughlin, Michael Love, Ponciano Ortiz, Chris Pool, Carmen

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Discovering the Olmecs

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CHAPTER 1

The Olmecs Come to Light

In the 1940s a series of articles with eye-catching titles such as “Great Stone Faces of the Mexican Jungle,” “Finding Jewels of Jade in a Mexican Swamp,” and “On the Trail of La Venta Man” appeared in the pages of *National Geographic Magazine*. Authored by archaeologist Matthew Stirling, those well-illustrated articles brought the world’s attention to a previously unknown archaeological culture of ancient Mexico, the Olmecs. The captivating magazine titles also correctly characterized the Olmecs, for we know today that giant stone heads and other magnificent stone monuments are their hallmark and that they were one of the earliest Mesoamerican societies to utilize jewelry and ritual objects created from what is often called “jade,” that is, high-quality green stones, including jadeite and serpentine.

However, the Olmecs were puzzling to scholars of that period because those rich discoveries came from an unexpected area—the sweltering tropical forests and river floodplains of Mexico’s southern Gulf coast. It was a region situated nearly equidistant between the great Maya cities of Yucatan and Guatemala and the large pre-Hispanic urban centers of the central Mexican highlands such as Teotihuacan, Cholula, and Tenochtitlan, yet lacking comparable archaeological grandeur. Furthermore, some scholars expressed doubt that the area’s unpleasant tropical environment was suitable for any significant cultural achievements. Nevertheless, it is precisely where the Olmecs had lived and flourished. But if the Olmecs seemed an enigma in terms of their location, they were also an enigma in time. The craftsmanship and splendor of their stone monuments certainly rivaled the stone carvings of the ancient Maya. Had the Olmecs been contemporaries of the Maya peoples? While some believed that to be the case, Matt Stirling disagreed with them. He felt certain that the Olmecs had preceded the Maya in time.

Over seven decades have now passed since Stirling's articles in *National Geographic Magazine*. During that period of time archaeological interest and research about the Olmecs have gained momentum, and our understanding of that ancient society has blossomed. Archaeological investigations have answered some fundamental questions, and the Olmecs no longer seem quite as enigmatic and mysterious as they once did. For example, radiocarbon dating has now placed them from c. 1150 to 400 BC, during Mesoamerica's Preclassic period. Stirling was therefore correct: the Olmecs' achievements predated those of the Classic period Maya, Teotihuacan, and Monte Albán. The antiquity of the Olmecs also means that their sophisticated stone monuments are the oldest known in Mexico and Central America, and are the antecedents to Mesoamerica's later stone carving traditions.

We have no idea what name or names the people of that ancient society called themselves, but it wasn't "Olmec." That name was applied to them less than a century ago. Soon after the Spanish conquest of Central Mexico in 1521, some of the myths and beliefs of Mexico's contact period societies were recorded by Spanish and native authors. The most extensive of those writings is *The General History of the Things of New Spain* (also known as the *Florentine Codex*), a documentation of the Aztecs of Central Mexico written by Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún. Included in the narratives and oral traditions that Sahagún recorded were the Aztecs' viewpoints about some of the contemporaneous societies that they had interacted with. Those included the peoples of the area of the states of Veracruz and Tabasco on Mexico's southern Gulf coast, whom they called the "Olmeca," "people from the east . . . a land of wealth, a land of abundance. There was all manner of food; there grew the cacao bean, . . . and liquid rubber." Sahagún's *General History* is but one of the sources mentioning the "historical" Olmeca—the "people of the rubber country" (the literal translation of the word "Olmeca" in Nahuatl, the Aztec language).

In the early twentieth century, artifacts and stone monuments found in that region of southeastern Mexico were frequently attributed to the "Olmeca" mentioned by Sahagún. By default that region's Preclassic period artifacts inherited the Olmeca (Olmec) label as well.

Because the Preclassic period Olmecs left no written history, our knowledge about them can only be gained by archaeological research that unearths and studies their ancient tools and technology, and their settlements. They are what we term an "archaeological culture," for they are defined on the basis of a distinctive complex of artifacts occur-



Fig. 1.1. Map showing the Olman area of Mexico's southern Gulf coast and the major towns and sites mentioned in the book. Drawing by Michael Volk.

ring within a limited geographic region and time span. The most visible distinguishing artifacts of the Preclassic period Olmecs are their magnificent stone monuments. It is significant that they initiated the carving of stone monuments in Mesoamerica, and that for several centuries they alone created such stone monuments. In fact, the distribution of sites with those stone monuments enables us today to approximate the extent of the Olmecs' domain, an area scholars have recently begun calling "Olman." Olman extended eastward from the Tuxtla Mountains of southern Veracruz to the humid lowlands of western Tabasco (fig. 1.1). Over two dozen sites with stone monuments are known within that area, but the majority of the carvings occur at just four large sites: La Venta, San Lorenzo, Tres Zapotes, and Laguna de los Cerros. Those sites are therefore considered to have been major Olmec political-religious centers.

Archaeological cultures and their sites are by necessity defined by artifacts, both large and small, but archaeological research is also directed at attempting to learn about the people that made and utilized those objects. As archaeologists have done for decades, in this book I thus refer to the people (or peoples) who created the precocious stone mon-

uments and displayed them at certain of their settlements on Mexico's Gulf coast as the Olmecs.

Seven decades of archaeological research have provided us with some understanding of the Olmecs, and today there are several good books and museum exhibition catalogs that very nicely summarize the current interpretations of the Olmecs' prehistory. However, although packed with information, they usually don't tell the reader much about the actual discoveries nor of the scholars who made those discoveries. They therefore leave out a very interesting aspect of Olmec archaeology—the events and misadventures that occurred along the bumpy pathway of research and exploration that has brought us to our present state of knowledge. Who were the dedicated archaeologists who suffered the Olmec region's heat, humidity, mosquitoes, and ticks to bring that ancient society to light? How did certain events, research choices, and sheer good (or bad) luck influence their projects and perhaps ultimately affect present-day interpretations? And how did local communities and individuals react to the research projects and discoveries in their territories?

This book provides some of those missing details and stories behind the archaeological quest for the Olmecs. The types of information presented vary somewhat from chapter to chapter because no two digs, no two archaeologists, and no two field seasons are ever the same. In addition, as the chapters move from initial explorations into increasingly sophisticated and diverse archaeological research efforts, the archaeological data and background stories change as well. Many of the tales are humorous, a few are sad, and some are ironical. But the good moments, as well as the various trials and tribulations faced by the archaeologists, are all directly responsible for what we know and don't know today about the Olmecs.

This book does not begin with a lengthy description of the Olmecs and their precocious achievements. Instead, it is hoped that as the tales unfold about the events and characters that shaped Olmec archaeology, any readers unfamiliar with the Olmecs will be learning about them bit by bit, just as the researchers did. In the final chapter I present some of my own thoughts about the Olmecs and what we have learned about them through archaeological research. Although that chapter is intended as a summary of the search and of our present knowledge concerning the Olmecs, I realize that a few readers may skip ahead and read that chapter first before undertaking the stories of the search. Either way, I hope you enjoy the journey of discovery.

CHAPTER 2

The Tulane Expedition and the Olmec World (1925–1926)

Exploring the Tuxtla Mountains

Some of the world's most important archaeological discoveries actually had humble beginnings. In fact, many have also been due to the serendipity of simply being in the right place at the right time, but usually for a completely different reason. The first significant developments in the long journey of the discovery of the Olmecs can be said to fall into such a category because they transpired on a project that was initiated to study the Maya.

When the First Tulane University Expedition to Middle America departed from New Orleans in 1925, its goal was “an archaeological and ethnological investigation [in the area] formerly inhabited by the most notable of the ancient population of America, the Maya Indians.” While that was an ambitious objective, the expedition was composed of just two people, Tulane University anthropologist Frans Blom and New Orleans writer-ethnologist Oliver La Farge. Blom's role in the expedition was to investigate “everything pertaining to archaeology,” while La Farge would inquire into “the customs and languages of the present-day Indians.” The area selected for that first expedition was the westernmost extent of the ancient Maya civilization, and it therefore included the states of Veracruz and Tabasco on Mexico's southern Gulf coast. Today we know that the domain of the ancient Olmecs, Olman, lay within that region, but in 1925 the archaeological culture we now call the Olmecs had yet to be clearly recognized.

The chosen starting point of the Tulane expedition was the town of San Andrés Tuxtla in the Tuxtla Mountains in the south of Veracruz state. The Tuxtla Mountains had been part of Olman, and by co-

incidence the expedition's starting point was not far from the village of Hueyapan. There, in the mid-1860s, a hacienda laborer clearing a patch of tropical forest unearthed a surprising object, a beautifully sculpted human head made of stone, 4 ft. 10 in. (1.47 m) in height. Today we recognize his discovery as an Olmec colossal stone head, but a century and a half ago the massive head attracted very little attention. In fact, the Hueyapan colossal head likewise played no role in the decision by Blom and La Farge to begin their trek in the Tuxtla Mountains. Although both knew about the head and were aware that it was not too far away, they made no attempt to view it, perhaps because they recognized that it was not Maya.

The compelling reason that had brought Blom and La Farge to these mountains was a much smaller artifact, a 6.5 in. (16 cm) tall green stone statuette that had been discovered in the area several decades earlier. The Tuxtla Statuette, as it is now commonly called, had captured Blom's attention because it is engraved with a Maya-like Long Count date of bar-and-dot numbers (fig. 2.1). The date, corresponding to AD 162, was the earliest Long Count date then known. Because the expedition's goals included gaining knowledge about the ancient Maya, the tiny statuette's very early Maya-like date had drawn the two investigators to that area.

While many books on the Olmecs characterize Olman as a lowland tropical riverine environment, the northwestern end of the domain is distinguished by the Tuxtla Mountains and their piedmont slopes, an area of c. 1200 sq. mi. (c. 3100 sq km). The Tuxtlas, as they are also known, are volcanic in origin, and large and small volcanic peaks abound in that landscape. While most of the volcanic activity took place thousands of years prior to any human presence in the area, there are historical accounts of small volcanic eruptions, and archaeological research in the region occasionally uncovers ash layers that attest to volcanic activity in recent prehistory as well. The Tuxtla Mountains were important to the Olmecs for the varied natural resources they contained, including most of the volcanic stone from which Olmec artisans at various centers sculpted their impressive monuments.

Roads were few in the Tuxtla Mountains in 1925, and Blom and La Farge undertook this stage of their journey primarily on horseback. They were usually accompanied by a guide and by helpers they picked up as their trek progressed. The two spent their daytime hours visiting ancient mounds and making notes on the antiquities they saw, and

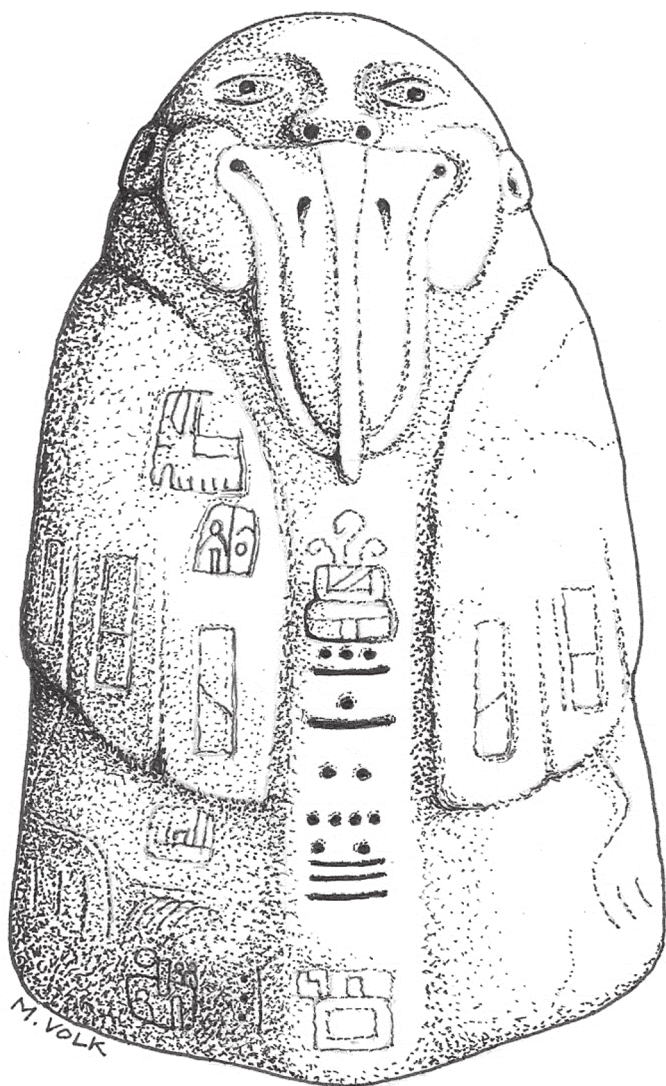


Fig. 2.1. The Tuxtla Statuette, with an engraved Maya-like Long Count date of 8.6.2.4.17 (AD 162). Drawing by Michael Volk.



Fig. 2.2. Village of Tatahuicapa in 1925, with the San Martín Pajapan volcano in the background. Photo by Blom and La Farge. Courtesy of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

they normally spent their nights enjoying the hospitality of small villages along their route. They described and detailed their journey in a two-volume book, *Tribes and Temples*, with Blom authoring the archaeological chapters and La Farge writing the sections dealing with ethnology and language.

Their travels were, of course, not without incident. Mexico's revolution had only recently ended, and small bands of rebels and bandits still roamed the countryside. Thus, soon after the onset of their journey they arrived late one afternoon at the village of Tatahuicapa (today, Tatahuicapan), where they intended to spend the night. They were met by the village authorities, to whom they presented modest gifts, but soon an armed "guard" of villagers also appeared. After greeting the tired travelers, the assembled villagers explained that only ten days earlier a small band of heavily armed antigovernment rebels had also arrived in the village seeking shelter. However, during their stay the rebel group "had made themselves obnoxious," so the villagers killed them. Their hosts treated Blom and La Farge much more warmly, and upon learning that they were interested in seeing old stone monuments, several villagers offered to show them just such a monument—a carved stone that was sitting at the peak of the large volcano visible in the distance, San Martín Pajapan (fig. 2.2).

Although intrigued by the notion of a stone monument atop the nearby volcano, La Farge and Blom nevertheless decided to first set off toward the coast to inspect a carved stone stela (an upright stone slab) with a “Maya-like” glyph that others had told them about. That carving was located near a village appropriately named Piedra Labrada (Carved Stone) (see fig. 1.1). After nine exhausting hours in the saddle and with night falling and a rainstorm rapidly approaching, they arrived at Piedra Labrada only to find that the village had been burned and abandoned. It was beginning to rain and too late in the day to continue on, so Blom and La Farge hung their hammocks on the charred posts of an abandoned house. There they spent a wet night, protected only somewhat from the rain by a tent fly (a small tarpaulin). In turn, their guide and helpers sought refuge from the rain by huddling all night underneath the hammocks of the two expedition leaders.

The next morning the group found a small farmstead where they were cordially greeted and fed, and the farmer’s son took them to the carving that they had traveled so far to see. It was indeed a stela. However, the stela’s carved glyphic motif was not Maya. Instead it would most likely be classified today as within the Classic period Veracruz art style. Their young guide then showed them several other carved stones, one of which was the upper portion of a statue that Blom believed depicted a female. He said of the 27.5 in. (70 cm) long fragment, “The head was well carved, somewhat broader at the bottom than top, and well rounded, giving the impression of a bald-headed person when seen from in front.” Blom’s description is interesting because in various forms of Olmec art humans are depicted with elongated (pear-shaped) bald heads such as Blom described for this carving. Was the statue fragment seen at Piedra Labrada by Blom and La Farge an Olmec carving? The photograph that they published of the statue was of poor quality. However, a recent print made from the original negative using modern digital technology shows the carving more clearly (fig. 2.3). Nonetheless, whether or not it was created by the Olmecs remains an intriguing question. Unfortunately the carving cannot be reexamined because it has long since disappeared.

Perhaps the major daily discomfort that must be endured while one is conducting archaeological research in the Olmec region—even more so than the region’s intense and enervating heat and humidity—is the amazing abundance of ticks, large and small, that abound on almost every bit of green vegetation on the landscape. Archaeologist Matthew Stirling is said to have once remarked that the ticks there were as thick



Fig. 2.3. Bald female statue fragment at Piedra Labrada. Photo by Blom and La Farge. Courtesy of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

as grapes hanging from a vine. If you brush against vegetation while walking on foot or riding horseback—something that is virtually impossible to avoid—you will collect ticks on your clothes and skin. Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge constantly suffered such indignities during their expedition. However, the ticks in the vicinity of Piedra Labrada

must have been particularly abundant, for they merited several comments by Blom, including the remark that it had been “agony to draw and photograph these monuments, as hordes of ticks were crawling over us.” In fact, the two men terminated their explorations at Piedra Labrada when “the itching of millions of tick bites drove us back to camp where we at once stripped and started the slow process of removing the insects with a concoction of tobacco leaves soaked in alcohol.”

Blom and La Farge returned on horseback to the village of Tatahuicapa, arriving exhausted and hungry after the arduous all-day journey. After a rest, their next adventure would be an ascent of the San Martín Pajapan volcano to view the stone carving at its peak. Although San Martín Pajapan is not the tallest volcanic peak in the Tuxtla Mountains, with an elevation of 4100 feet (1250 m), it is arguably the most visible and impressive of the Tuxtla’s volcanos because it stands somewhat to the east of the main mountain mass.

Their ascent of the volcano was on foot and uneventful, and upon reaching the summit they found the carved stone. It was a large seated human figure wearing a headdress decorated with a snarling face that Blom observed “resembles a jade head now in the National Museum of Mexico City.” Scholars now recognize that the features of the San Martín Pajapan statue are quintessentially Olmec, and the 53 in. (1.35 m) tall carving that Blom and La Farge saw atop the volcano that day certainly ranks as one of the masterpieces of Olmec monumental stone art (see fig. 8.2). However, Blom and La Farge were not the first “outsiders” to see and record that striking Olmec carving. It was first documented by a Mexican engineer, Ismael Loya, who came upon it while mapping on the volcano in 1897. Frans Blom had, in fact, met Señor Loya during a previous trip to Mexico and at that time Loya had informed him of both the stela at Piedra Labrada and the statue atop the San Martín Pajapan volcano. Blom and La Farge were therefore aware of the statue long before their arrival in the village of Tatahuicapa.

A crude sketch of the carving, made by Señor Loya, was published in *Tribes and Temples*, suggesting that it might have been in Blom’s possession prior to the start of the expedition (fig. 2.4). Loya’s sketch depicts the seated personage with arms extended forward to the ground and holding a bar-like object. However, Loya had also mentioned to Blom that he had moved the carving from its original location to a nearby spot in order to use it to mark a point in his survey, and in so doing had broken off the arms of the personage. Thus when Blom and La Farge arrived at the carving they found it to be missing its arms, legs, and the bar.

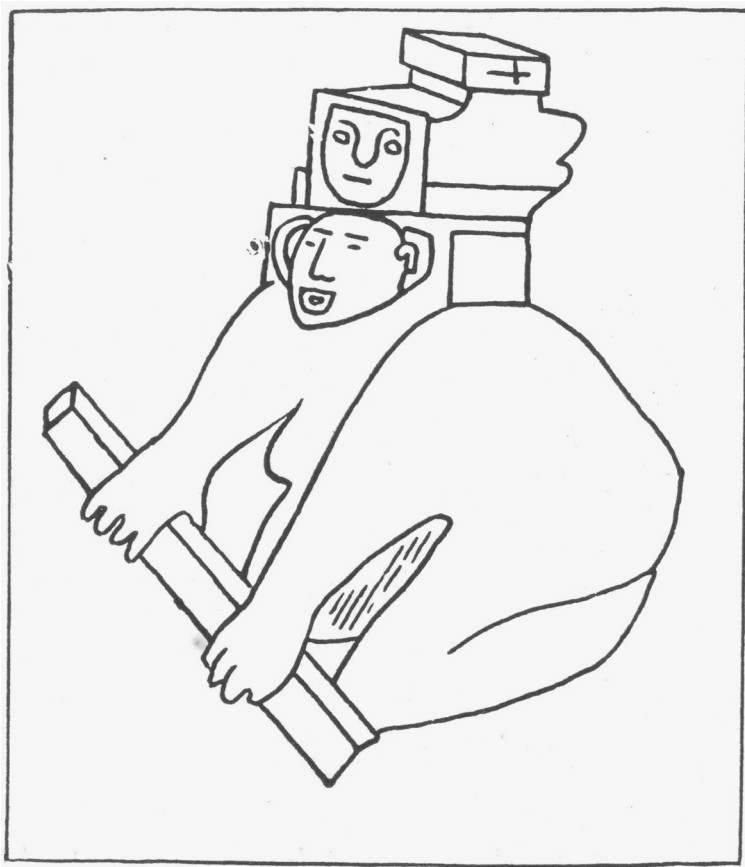


Fig. 2.4. Sketch made by Ismael Loya in 1897 of the statue atop the San Martín Pajapan volcano. Courtesy of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

Blom and La Farge published a photo of the magnificent San Martín Pajapan seated figure in *Tribes and Temples*, thus bringing that Olmec monument to the attention of scholars. They also reported an interesting snippet of archaeological data. Loya had told Blom that beneath the monument he had found a small pit with “pieces of pottery containing various small objects of jade.” One of the latter was “carved in the form of a rattlesnake.”

Blom and La Farge did not move the large stone carving, nor did they find its missing limbs, and it remained atop the volcano for another four decades. Its removal from the volcano is discussed in chapter 8.

The Wrong Place but the Right Time: La Venta Is Revealed

The town of Coatzacoalcos, about 30 mi. (50 km) east of Tatahuicapa and the Tuxtla Mountains, was the jumping-off point for the next stage of the Tulane expedition. The town is situated on the Gulf of Mexico at the mouth of the Coatzacoalcos River, a major waterway running through eastern Olman. Blom had heard reports of ruins in the area of another nearby river, the Tonalá, and he believed the ruins might be the remains of a town visited in 1518 by a Spanish expedition led by Juan de Grijalva. The sixteenth-century Spanish chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo states that Grijalva's fleet, sailing along the Gulf coast, had come ashore in the vicinity of the town of Tonalá, had traded with the local inhabitants, and had seen "idols" and "tall idol houses" (pyramids). Blom wanted to see those ruins.

To reach the reported ruins Blom and La Farge rented a sailboat and traveled south along the Gulf coast to the Tonalá River and the town of the same name. There they acquired local guides and sailed inland along the river and then up a smaller tributary, the Río Balsillo. They were informed by their guides that the ruins they sought were located on "an island entirely surrounded by swamps," and in time they were forced to abandon the luxury of their sailboat and wade on foot through those swamps until they finally reached the island. After that ordeal, what they saw might have at first disappointed them: merely a small cluster of farm field clearings laboriously extracted from the dense surrounding tropical forest. Furthermore, they had probably already begun to realize that in spite of all of their struggles to reach this location, they were not at the ruins of the settlement reported in the writings of Bernal Díaz del Castillo. In fact, the pair had actually been taken to a settlement that had flourished more than two thousand years before Grijalva's expedition of 1518. Their guides referred to the place as La Venta.

Blom and La Farge spent one day on the island, during which time their guides took them to see eight carved stone monuments in both the maize fields and the uncleared tropical forest. They included three massive rectangular basalt blocks, each with low-relief carvings and a frontal niche containing a high-relief carving of a seated personage (fig. 2.5). Today this type of Olmec monument is referred to as an altar-throne, or a tabletop altar-throne (due to its projecting upper ledge). In addition Blom and La Farge recorded three stones that they listed as "stelae" and a stone that Blom described as "a huge block . . . approximately circular." They labeled that last one "Altar 1." Although many of the carvings that



Fig. 2.5. Altar 4, La Venta. Photo by Blom and La Farge. Courtesy of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.



Fig. 2.6. Colossal stone head, La Venta. Photo by Blom and La Farge. Courtesy of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

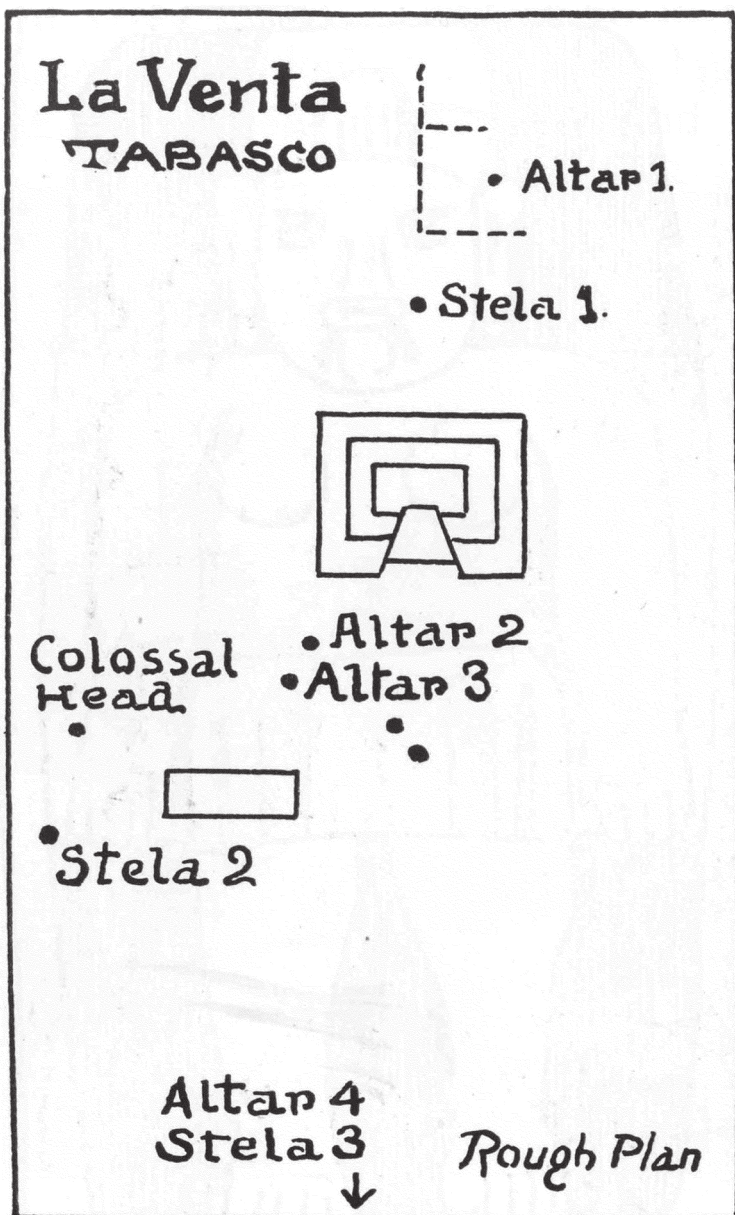


Fig. 2.7. Sketch map of La Venta published by Blom and La Farge. It is the first map made of that site. Courtesy of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

the adventurers recorded that day are now considered to be some of the finest examples of Olmec monumental stone art, one discovery in particular caught their attention. “After this we came to the most amazing monument of all—a huge bell-shaped boulder. At first it puzzled us very much, but after a little digging, to our amazement, we saw that what we had in front of us was the upper part of a colossal head” (fig. 2.6).

Blom and La Farge also recognized that a nearby jungle-covered hill was an ancient pyramid; they estimated its height at 25 m (it is actually c. 30 m/c. 100 ft. tall). In addition, to the north of the pyramid they noted a row of “small pillars” projecting above the ground surface, “forming something like a fence.” Their simple sketch in *Tribes and Temples* of the site’s layout is the first published map of La Venta (fig. 2.7).

Blom and La Farge believed that the monuments they had recorded at La Venta were “under strong influence of the Maya culture to the east.” Their interpretation was not illogical in terms of the site’s location in southern Mexico and what was known of Mexican prehistory in 1925. They also realized that the site’s great monoliths, most created from igneous rock, had to have been somehow brought to La Venta from elsewhere, for there is no native igneous rock in that vicinity. Blom therefore posed a question that still perplexes archaeologists: how did the Indians transport these large blocks of stone over a distance of more than 60 mi. (100 km), across swampy ground or along the rivers?

Blom and La Farge were careful scholars, and they published in the pages of *Tribes and Temples* a detailed account of the discoveries made during their one-day visit to La Venta. They had traveled to that remote site on the possibility that it was a town mentioned by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, and they did not realize the importance of the ruins they had instead seen. And, although it would take several more decades of research and debate before the cultural and temporal affiliation of La Venta became clarified, the discovery of the ancient Olmecs had taken a significant step forward.

CHAPTER 3

The First Excavations: Tres Zapotes (1938–1940)

Thirteen years would pass from the time of the Tulane expedition until the first actual archaeological exploration of any Gulf coast Olmec site was attempted. The credit for taking that next step belongs to Matthew Stirling of the Smithsonian Institution. Born in 1896 in Salinas, California, Stirling attended the University of California–Berkeley, where he was a pole vaulter and triple jumper on the university track team. He joined the staff of the Smithsonian Institution in 1921, and his early career included archaeological projects in the southeastern United States, explorations of the Upper Amazon, and directing a large, multifaceted research expedition to Dutch New Guinea.

During his studies at Berkeley, Stirling became intrigued with some aspects of Mesoamerican archaeology, an interest that grew over the subsequent years. He was particularly fascinated by the colossal stone heads found at Hueyapan in Veracruz and La Venta in Tabasco, and he recognized similarities between those huge carvings and certain small jade artifacts in the Smithsonian collections. Partially as a result of those interests, in 1932, when he was serving as the director of the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology, he initiated a Smithsonian program to investigate the eastern and western peripheries of the Maya area. Under that program, investigations were carried out in the eastern Maya area from 1932 to 1936 by Smithsonian archaeologist Duncan Strong. Research on the western Maya region, the same general area visited by Blom and La Farge, began in 1938 with Matt Stirling himself in charge.

When Matt and his wife Marion drove south from Texas into Mexico that year, it was their very first time in that country, and they were accompanied on the trip by Marion's parents. Matt was excited. From

reading *Tribes and Temples* he knew that the colossal stone head and other monuments that Blom and La Farge had reported at La Venta had been found near a jungle-covered pyramid. He was also aware that none of the published reports on the Hueyapan stone head mentioned any surrounding archaeological remains. However, Matt had a hunch that the Hueyapan colossal head had to be associated with an unrecognized or unreported archaeological site, and he was determined to visit Hueyapan and see for himself.

Leaving Marion and her parents comfortably situated in a hotel in Mexico City, Matt set out for southern Veracruz. However, reaching the village of Hueyapan proved to be a difficult task. At that time there were no roads into that rural area of the Tuxtla Mountains, so Matt turned to one of the same modes of transportation that had been utilized by Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge—horseback. The nearest accessible town to Hueyapan was Tlacotalpan, on the Papaloapan River. There he rented horses and found a local guide to lead him to Hueyapan. Their ride took eight hot and tiring hours. They finally arrived in Hueyapan late in the afternoon with the anticipation of viewing the colossal head and its surroundings. They were greeted with disheartening news. The great stone carving that Matt sought was not actually at Hueyapan but instead was near a village a few miles further north, Tres Zapotes. Stirling and his guide spent the night in Hueyapan and the next morning rode on to Tres Zapotes. As the two men neared the latter village, Matt was excited to see that his hunch was right: archaeological mound groups were clearly visible in the surrounding countryside.

When Matt finally located the colossal stone head that he had journeyed so far to study, it was almost completely buried, but he was able to partially clear it of soil (fig. 3.1). It was evident to him that the large stone head was situated within a small “plaza” area flanked by four earthen mounds. Furthermore, the ground surface in that area was covered with ancient pottery fragments. Before departing from Tres Zapotes, Matt explored the lands surrounding the village and found additional archaeological remains.

Matt was exhilarated by what he had seen and learned at Tres Zapotes, and upon returning to the U.S. he quickly began planning a research project to investigate the site. His plans garnered the sponsorship of the Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society, and in December 1938 he and Marion set out for Tres Zapotes to begin archaeological research there. Their initial field season would last until mid-April of 1939. While it may seem odd to some readers that the archaeological research would begin in December, a mid-winter start



Fig. 3.1. Tres Zapotes. Boy and colossal stone head (Mon. A). March 1939. Photo by Alexander Wetmore. Smithsonian Institution Archive #SIA2013-07702.

is not uncommon in Mesoamerican archaeology because that is when the dry season begins. It is therefore the time of year when excavations can be carried out without the constant problems brought by rain and water-soaked excavation units. Ending the field season in mid-April has a logic as well. Throughout the spring the heat and humidity continually increase in southern Veracruz, and by May the climate can be truly



Fig. 3.2. The Stirlings' house at Tres Zapotes, March 1939. The oxcart hauled artifacts for the project. Photo by Alexander Wetmore. Smithsonian Institution Archive #SIA2013-07701.

oppressive. In June the rains begin in earnest, and the local farmers working as laborers on archaeological projects are anxious to return to their fields and plant their crops.

Joining the Stirlings for the first season at Tres Zapotes were archaeologist Clarence Weiant and his wife, and National Geographic Society photographer Richard Stewart. Getting everyone to the site was not an easy task. Matt Stirling arranged for a launch to carry the assembled group from Tlacotalpan and along a tributary of the Papaloapan River to the tiny three-hut settlement of Boca San Miguel. There everyone switched to horseback or muleback and together followed the small Arroyo Hueyapan northward to Tres Zapotes, a ride of less than two hours.

Upon their arrival at the site, the group's first task was to build a field camp. The labor force for that work and for the subsequent two years of excavations was drawn from the village. The workers were hired on a rotational basis so that everyone was provided with an opportunity to work and earn money. The camp was situated slightly outside of the village and consisted of a group of thatched huts that functioned as living quarters, a cooking and dining area, and a laboratory (fig. 3.2). Even the

photographic darkroom for Richard Stewart was a thatched hut, meaning that it was useable only after dark!

The researchers' efforts turned immediately to the excavation of the site's colossal head, the top of which protruded above the ground surface in the small group of mounds that the archaeologists nicknamed the Cabeza (Head) Group (fig. 3.3). Because this was the first Olmec colossal head ever completely excavated, nobody knew what to expect. Writing later about the experience, Stirling said he wondered, "Was it attached to a body? If so, what would be its position—crouching, seated or standing?" Twenty men were assigned to the task of unearthing the head, and soon the massive carving was completely exposed. The huge head, which Stirling labeled Monument A (more commonly known today as Tres Zapotes Head 1), is 4 ft. 10 in. (1.47 m) tall (see fig. 3.1). It was first estimated to weigh approximately 10 tons; that estimate was later revised to 8 tons (7260 kg). However, there was no body beneath the head, which is characteristic of all seventeen colossal heads known today; they were carved as heads and were not part of larger sculptures. The Tres Zapotes head rested upon a constructed foundation of unworked stone slabs laid in front of the Cabeza Group's south mound, and it faced northward across the small plaza. Stirling and Weiant excavated a trench across the plaza from the stone head to the north mound but apparently didn't recover any artifacts.

Apart from the excavation of the colossal head, the research plan for the first field season was very basic. It primarily consisted of excavating a number of pits and trenches to "sample" the site in an effort to ascertain its general nature and to enable Weiant to reconstruct a rough ceramic chronology (a record of changes in pottery types over time) from the pottery sherds recovered. In addition to supervising the excavations, project members were able to devote some time each day to exploring the fields and forests at Tres Zapotes in more detail. Although today the valley has been cleared of any heavily wooded areas, in the late 1930s it contained large tracts of tropical forest that were interspersed with fields (*milpas*) cleared for farming, and all unplanted *milpas* were overgrown with tall grass and weeds. The archaeologists' daily explorations enabled them to estimate the size of the ancient settlement, which they soon discovered extended for nearly two miles up the valley. During those archaeological reconnaissances, project members were also able to discover mounds and stone monuments that were hidden by the dense vegetation.

The hired men doing the actual manual labor for the archaeologists

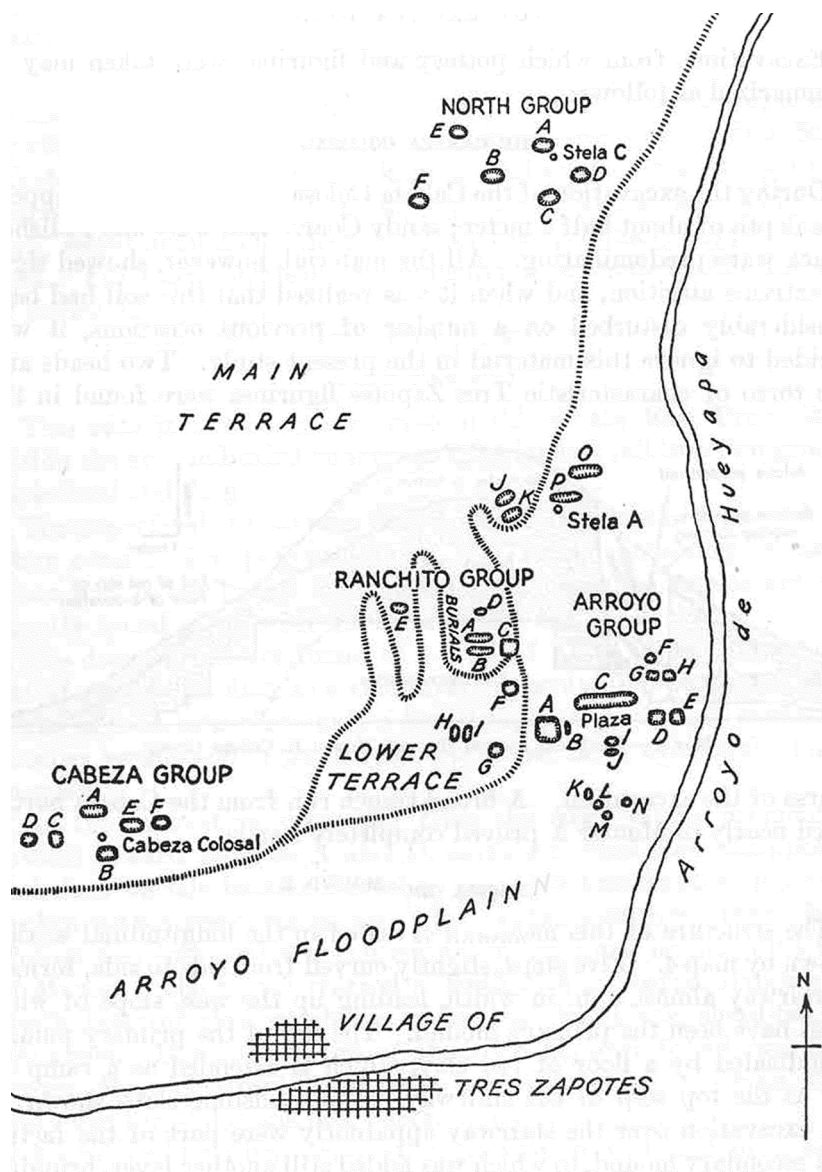


Fig. 3.3. Map of Tres Zapotes showing the general site layout and the locations of the Olmec colossal head (Cabeza Group, lower left) and Stela C (North Group, upper center). After Map 3, *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 139*, Smithsonian Institution (1943).

were, of course, the local farmers. They had an intimate knowledge of the land and the surrounding forests, and once they realized that Matt and his associates were interested in carved stones, they took them to their *milpas* and into the forest to see stones that they knew of. So in addition to the mundane excavations directed at sampling different areas of the site, work was also undertaken to clear buried stones at various site locations. Those explorations produced impressive carvings, including large stone stelae and carved stone boxes, causing Stirling to later joke, “In archaeology it pays to leave no stone unturned.” However, most of those discoveries were post-Olmec in date.

It was a typical workday morning in mid-January 1939 when Stirling and a group of workers set off for a distant part of the site to clear a flat stone shown to them by a farmer several days earlier. Stirling suspected that the object was a stone stela and hoped that it would be carved rather than plain. It took hours of work before the stone was finally cleared and could be rolled over, and the group was disappointed to find that after all of their efforts the stone was undecorated. However, since they were already in that area, Stirling decided to explore a less imposing stone barely exposed at the edge of a nearby *milpa*—at the base of the second tallest mound at Tres Zapotes.

As the workers began clearing the second stone, it could be seen to be rectangular in cross section and larger than Stirling had expected. He became excited when he began to discern faint traces of a weathered design on one side. The stone seemed to be the middle section of a large carved stela, and because Stirling had been labeling newly discovered stone monuments alphabetically, this newest find was recorded as Stela C. As the workers expanded the size of their pit to allow them to dig deeper, they uncovered a second stone adjacent to the suspected stela—a large flat disk-shaped stone. Stirling knew that at many ancient Maya cities large round stone disk “altars” were often situated in front of vertical stelae and that such monument pairs were frequently erected at the base of pyramids. Stela C became more intriguing!

At first glance, the back of Stela C appeared to be uncarved, so Stirling had his workers continue clearing that part of the stone while he attempted to discern the weathered design on the front side of the monument. He was soon interrupted by a worker who informed him, “Jefe, aquí hay números” (Chief, there are numbers here). The back area of Stela C had bar-and-dot symbols that the astute worker had realized represented numbers. When Stirling looked at those bars and dots he

was thrilled to see that the numbers were arranged in a sequence, just like Long Count calendric dates on Maya stelae (fig. 3.4).

A traditional Maya Long Count date consists of a sequence of five numbers, each representing a particular period of time. The numerical sequence of Stela C had been arranged vertically, but only four numbers of the sequence, 16.6.16.18, were present. The sequence's beginning number was not on this fragment of the stela. Quickly jotting down the visible numbers, Matt hurried back to camp to consult books he had brought that had calendric correlation formulas. With those he was soon able to determine that the missing beginning number in the sequence must have been a 7, making the complete Long Count date 7.16.6.16.18. For decades scholars have been able to convert and correlate Maya Long Count dates to Western calendar dates (and today computerized correlation programs abound on the Internet). It did not take Matt Stirling long to determine that the date carved on Stela C correlated to 31 BC.

Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge had begun their expedition not too far from Tres Zapotes because of another object with a Maya-like Long Count date, the small greenstone Tuxtla Statuette (see fig. 2.1). The statuette's 8.6.2.4.17 inscription correlates to AD 162. Stela C's date was nearly two hundred years earlier, making it the oldest Long Count date then known in Mesoamerica.

The project's first field season was not without village problems that impacted the research and had to be dealt with by the archaeologists. Perhaps the biggest of such problems involved intra-village feuds. The settlement of Tres Zapotes, with a population then of perhaps two hundred people, was divided by a small stream. The stream created "upper" and "lower" sections of the village, and the residents of those two sections did not always get along. Men from both the upper and lower village areas were brought together daily by the archaeological work, and tensions frequently developed. For a period of time early in the project, the laborers from both the upper and lower village carried guns to work with them and kept them close at hand. However, they promised Matt and Marion that if gun battles did erupt, the archaeologists would not be hurt! Fortunately, none occurred.

At the end of the 1939 field season at Tres Zapotes, the Stela C fragment was carefully moved from the field to a new home in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City (fig. 3.5). Soon thereafter, Stirling published an article on his find in *National Geographic Magazine*, "Discovering the New World's Oldest Dated Work of Man." Apart from



Fig. 3.4. Marion Stirling kneels beside Stela C. Four bar-and-dot numbers, 16.6.16.18, are visible. An associated circular altar can be seen behind the stela fragment. Photo by Richard Stewart. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, ID number *stirling_14*; Richard Hewitt Stewart/National Geographic Stock.



Fig. 3.5. Marion Stirling and others on a launch departing from Boca San Miguel, April 1939. The cargo included Stela C, visible on the bench behind her. Photo by Alexander Wetmore. Smithsonian Institution Archive #SIA2013-07703.

the discovery of various carved stone monuments, the results of the first season of field work were not spectacular. The archaeological evidence that had been recovered demonstrated that the site of Tres Zapotes had a complex settlement history that extended from Olmec times to perhaps a few centuries before the Spanish conquest. However, no signifi-

cant data had been unearthed pertaining specifically to the Olmec period settlement that had once existed there.

Archaeologist Philip Drucker joined the project in place of Clarence Weiant for the second field season (1939–1940). Drucker was an interesting character. Prior to attending college he had been a cowboy, and after receiving his PhD at the University of California–Berkeley he gained eminence both as an authority on the Indians of the Northwest Coast and as an archaeologist. His participation in the Tres Zapotes project marked the beginning of what was to be an important and productive period of collaborative research on the Olmecs with Matt Stirling. In their joint research it is fair to say that Stirling's greatest interest lay in the stone monuments at the sites they investigated, while Drucker dealt with most of the actual “dirt” archaeology—the excavations, stratigraphy, and ceramic analyses. Stirling would publicize their discoveries to a worldwide audience via the pages of *National Geographic Magazine* while Drucker generally stayed out of the limelight and published in scientific outlets.

Drucker's task during the second field season at Tres Zapotes was to carry out more detailed stratigraphic excavations in order to further refine the site's ceramic chronology. However, that second season got off to a rocky start. During the first field season the workers had been paid in chits redeemable at a store in the village. However, just as the second season got under way the workers demanded to be paid in cash, and daily! Of course, in view of the village's remote location, daily payments in cash would have been a near impossibility for Stirling, and he therefore could not comply with their demands. However, the problem continued, so he notified the archaeological authorities in Mexico City of the troubles he was having. Soon an army lieutenant and six soldiers arrived at Tres Zapotes and spoke to the village authorities. What was said is not recorded, but the labor dispute was resolved and afterward the workers apparently harbored no hard feelings about the incident.

Perhaps it was a coincidence, but soon after the pay dispute, union organizers from Veracruz city showed up at the project camp. In their meeting with Matt Stirling, the union representatives threatened to organize the project's labor force—unless, of course, they received a relatively large sum of money (a bribe) from Stirling. Matt informed the union organizers that he was a foreigner and had to obey the laws of Mexico. He stated that if the project had to pay higher wages it would do so, but because the project had only a limited amount of money, it would be forced to work fewer weeks.

Several days after the confrontation with the union organizers, the village officials of Tres Zapotes came to the site to speak with Stirling. Their tone was serious. “Jefe,” they said, “some union organizers from Veracruz have come and talked with us. They have made great promises to us, including higher wages.” Matt explained to them, as he had to the organizers, that he had a limited amount of money and that higher wages would mean a shorter field season. The authorities paused, and then asked, “Jefe, what should we do? Shall we kill them?” Matt suggested that was not a good idea. However, the union organizers were not seen at the camp again; Matt and Marion Stirling could only hope that they had returned to Veracruz city unharmed.

Drucker spent the second field season directing the excavation of over two dozen deep trenches at various locales on the site. While most of them ended up merely providing data useful to him for reconstructing the post-Olmec Late Preclassic and Classic period ceramic chronology of the site, several of the trenches yielded surprising results. Below a nearly 10 ft. thick cap of alluvial deposits, his excavations encountered a thick layer of volcanic ash, and beneath that ash, Preclassic period ceramics. Those trenches indicated that the earliest vestiges of a Preclassic period (Olmec) settlement at Tres Zapotes lay hidden below deep deposits of alluvium and volcanic ash. However, that fact seems to have somehow escaped the attention of many scholars, and over the decades the lack of observable Olmec remains on the present-day ground surface at Tres Zapotes has perplexed many of them.

The reader may have noticed that the word “Olmec” has seldom appeared in the discussions of the Tres Zapotes field research. It is perhaps ironic that the colossal stone head that had attracted Stirling to Tres Zapotes was the only major Olmec stone carving that he would see at the site. Today we know that most of the stone carvings Matt uncovered in his research there post-date the Olmecs by several hundred years. Stirling seemed to be aware of that fact, perhaps in part because of Stela C’s 31 BC date.

In retrospect, two smaller stone carvings unearthed by Stirling are unquestionably Olmec: Monuments M and H. Both carvings were apparently found during the first field season, but perhaps because they are not spectacular works of art, they received little attention from Stirling or other project members (or from recent scholars). Monument M, nearly 4 ft. (1.2 m) tall, is the statue of a seated personage. The arms and legs of the statue were missing when it was found. The person’s face is carved in the Olmec style, and the ear areas are adorned with a rectangular serrated decoration also frequently found in Olmec statu-



Fig. 3.6a. Tres Zapotes Monument H, misidentified by Stirling as an owl and incorrectly displayed upside down for decades. Photo by the author.



Fig. 3.6b. Tres Zapotes Monument H inverted to its correct orientation, showing it to be the head of an Olmec supernatural creature. Photo and photo enhancement by the author.

ary. According to Stirling, between the first and second field seasons, when he and his colleagues were in the U.S., villagers used oxen to drag the statue “to the edge of the village, where the head broke off.” Then, sometime after 1940 the statue disappeared from Tres Zapotes and likewise from the current literature on the Olmecs.

But is it really missing? Several years ago a former student of mine informed me that a carved statue head strikingly similar to that of Monument M was on display in the Amparo Museum in Puebla, Mexico, where its provenience was listed as La Venta. Tres Zapotes expert Chris Pool (see chapter 14) and I have now studied the head carefully. It is unquestionably the head of Monument M and has been “hiding in plain sight” for many years.

Monument H, on the other hand, has been virtually ignored by Olmec scholars due to a quirk of human perception. Stirling identified the carving as an owl, and in photographs published by Stirling and others the carved stone piece does indeed look like an owl, and an un-Olmec owl at that (fig. 3.6a). The fact is, however, that for many decades the carving had simply been displayed upside down! When inverted, the carving can easily be seen to resemble a typical Olmec statue head, though eroded (fig. 3.6b). There is a cleft at the top of the head and

a face with narrow slit eyes surmounted by thick eyebrow elements, a wide nose, and a slightly down-turned mouth with two frontal fangs.

Stirling's Tres Zapotes project initiated the excavation stage of the search for data on the Olmecs. However, his colleague Weiant correctly commented later that the research had "contribute[d] little toward unraveling the mystery that surrounds Olmec civilization": who, when, and what were the Olmecs?

CHAPTER 4

Stone Heads in the Jungle (1940)

In 1940, in the middle of the second field season at Tres Zapotes, Matt and Marion Stirling took a few weeks off from the rigors of fieldwork. Leaving the Tres Zapotes excavations in the capable hands of Phil Drucker, they set out on a trip to visit La Venta, a site they had never been to. La Venta was nearly as remote then as it had been when the Tullane expedition had visited it over a dozen years earlier, and to reach the ruins the Stirlings followed much of their predecessors' route. Because it was the dry season, they were able to get to their starting point, the town of Tonalá, in a truck. From there they hired a launch and began the ascent of the Tonalá and Balsillo Rivers toward a small riverside village where they intended to land and begin an overland trek into La Venta. It was nightfall when they finally arrived at the village, and they were surprised to find it abandoned. However, a Mexican oil prospecting team was camping there, and the geologists welcomed the Stirlings, providing them with a good dinner and a tent in which to sleep. The next morning Matt and Marion bade good-bye to their overnight hosts and began the hike inland toward La Venta. Led by a local guide, they followed trails through dense tropical forest and then "wallowed afoot in the muck" of waist-deep swamps, eventually emerging onto the island-like high ground upon which La Venta is situated.

However, even after they reached La Venta, the site's ruins and stone monuments were not immediately visible to them. The narrow 4 mi. (6.6 km) long island was heavily forested except for some scattered clearings used as agricultural plots (*milpas*) by the few residents of the remote area. Matt and Marion had brought a canvas pup tent with them and planned to camp at the site, but a farmer warned them that jaguars roamed the area at night, and offered them instead the use of one of his

family's palm-thatched huts, situated in a clearing near the center of the island. The hut was serving as the family's chicken house, but the chickens were quickly evicted in favor of the Stirlings. Everyone seemed to agree that in the tropical heat and humidity of La Venta, the rustic hut was certainly preferable to camping in the small canvas tent.

It had taken the Stirlings five days to reach La Venta, and they would spend a total of ten days exploring the site. The primary purpose of their visit was to study and photograph the eight stone monuments that had been reported by Blom and La Farge, if they could find them. Of course, Matt and Marion also harbored the hope of finding other stone carvings as well. They lacked permits to carry out any actual archaeological excavations and did not intend to do so. The "excavations" mentioned in their publications only involved clearing the brush and removing the topsoil from partly buried monuments to expose them for photographing and drawing.

To assist them in those efforts they recruited seven men from among the few families that carried out subsistence farming in forest clearings in that sparsely settled region. Some of those workers remembered seeing carved stones in the forest and the fields, but had paid little attention to them. They were happy to show Matt and Marion the stones they knew of. Before long, two stelae and three tabletop altar-thrones seen earlier by Blom and La Farge were rediscovered.

However, there were also some surprises. When the carving labeled "Altar 1" by the Tulane expedition was rediscovered and cleared of jungle overgrowth and topsoil, it turned out not to be a large circular altar but rather an enormous fallen stela, 14 ft. long and 6 ft. wide (4.3×1.8 m). The stela had a bas-relief carving that depicted two elaborately costumed personages standing face to face. Matt Stirling quickly revised the monument numbering system begun by Blom and La Farge, and their "Altar 1" became his "Stela 3." It still carries that designation today.

It did not take long before undiscovered carvings also came to light. One of the first was found about 100 yards (c. 100 m) to the south of La Venta's jungle-covered earthen pyramid mound. It was a massive rectangular block of volcanic stone, 6 ft. tall and about 9 ft. on its sides (1.8×2.7 m). A great stylized "supernatural" face covered the stone's front face, while large "wing" motifs decorated its two sides. Stirling gave the newly available designation "Altar 1" to the discovery.

One of the largest monuments that had been seen by the Tulane expedition was their Altar 4 (see fig. 2.5), situated about 300 yards



Fig. 4.1. La Venta Altar 5, the “Quintuplet Altar,” front view. The personage seated in the altar’s frontal niche holds a baby with supernatural features. Note also the mutilation of this large carving. Photo by the author.

(c. 300 m) to the south of the Stirlings’s newly discovered Altar 1. When Matt and Marion explored a recently cleared banana patch a few yards behind Altar 4, they came upon another large rectangular altar that was nearly completely buried. Matt labeled it “Altar 5.” When it was cleared of the surrounding soil it was seen to have magnificent carved imagery. Altars, or altar-thrones as they are called now, are generally characterized by a frontal niche containing a seated personage carved in high relief. The seated male personage in Altar 5’s frontal niche holds a baby on his lap—a baby with serrated ear elements and supernatural facial features (fig. 4.1). In addition, the well-preserved low-relief carvings on the two side panels of this altar-throne portray pairs of Olmec adults holding babies with supernatural features (fig. 4.2). Because a total of five infants are shown on the monument, it is sometimes referred to as the “Quintuplet Altar.”



Fig. 4.2. La Venta Altar 5, side view. Both sides of the altar-throne are decorated with bas-relief carvings of Olmec adults holding supernatural babies. Note the different headdress types worn by the adults. Photo by the author.

The overall beauty of the Quintuplet Altar was marred by the fact that the carving's four upper corners and most of its top ledge were missing. They had been battered away sometime in antiquity, and that perplexed Matt Stirling. He wondered if the damage had been inflicted by a "conquering group." We now know that such mutilation of certain Olmec stone monuments is not uncommon. Over the past few decades, theories of iconoclasm or of internal revolution to explain the damage have given way to new explanations. Those are taken up in chapter 18.

The discovery of Altar 5 was quite exciting, but the Stirlings' clearing operations in front of nearby Altar 4 provided what is perhaps the most important set of archaeological data uncovered on this initial visit to La Venta. Matt wrote that during the work "we encountered a clay floor of mixed burned material. The altar rests on this floor, on top of a foundation of white limestone nodules. At this floor level, about five feet

in front . . . we encountered 99 large jade beads . . . there was also one bead of amethyst. These were all found in position in the form of necklaces and armlets.”

The discovery that Altar 4 sat upon a purposely prepared foundation, or floor, is significant in light of the very similar stone foundation uncovered by Matt a few years earlier, beneath the Tres Zapotes colossal head. The presence on Altar 4’s foundation floor of jade jewelry positioned as if representing armlets and necklaces is likewise significant, but also problematic. It seems unlikely that the jewelry had been worn by an actual human burial interred in front of Altar 4. During its lifespan the altar-throne would have been openly displayed sitting upon its ground-level foundation floor. There would not have been a layer of soil in front of the massive stone carving in which to bury a body, and no bone material, teeth, or other evidence of a burial was noted by Stirling. However, there is a more plausible explanation. Subsequent excavations at La Venta—mentioned in later chapters—revealed jade ornaments laid out to create “pseudo-burials.” The Altar 4 jades apparently represent a further example of that practice. Unfortunately, Matt Stirling did not publish any drawings or maps or additional information on that interesting find.

In spite of his wonderful new discoveries, Stirling was frustrated because he could not locate the colossal head and Stela 2, both reported by Blom and La Farge. Eventually, however, one of the workers recalled seeing some stones in another area of the forest to the south of the site’s large pyramid mound. As Stirling relates the tale, the worker “cut his way through the dense growth for no more than fifty yards when we came to a large hemispherical stone almost completely concealed by vines and growth. I looked at it closely. Lo and behold, here was Blom’s colossal head that we had almost given up hope of locating! Less than twenty yards away a large stela lay on its back. This I immediately recognized as Blom’s Stela 2.”

As the workers began exposing the colossal head (today, La Venta Head 1), another serendipitous event occurred that is again best told in Matt’s own words. “While this work was going on, a small boy who happened to be standing by remarked that he had seen some stones near the new *milpa* [maize field] his father was working. I went with him to a point in the forest about a half mile away, and one after another he showed me three round projecting stones in a line about thirty yards apart.” When cleared, those stones turned out to be three more colos-

sal stone heads! They were positioned about 100 yards (c. 100 m) north of the pyramid, and occurred in an east-west row. The new discoveries were called Heads 2, 3, and 4.

The Stirlings' brief time at La Venta had produced exciting results, and they returned to Tres Zapotes buoyed by their discoveries. In retrospect, it is remarkable that although their initial visit to the site was short, Matt and Marion Stirling had the good fortune to unearth and record the site's largest and most impressive stone monuments, including all four of its known colossal stone heads. And when Matt's article "Great Stone Faces in the Mexican Jungle" was published in the September 1940 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*, the La Venta Olmecs and their magnificent stone monuments were finally brought to the world's attention.

CHAPTER 5

Fortuitous Decisions at La Venta (1942–1943)

Matthew Stirling was excited by the discoveries that he and Marion had made during their short time at La Venta, and he was anxious to begin large-scale archaeological investigations there. Matt started planning an extensive research project to begin in 1942. Once again he asked Philip Drucker to assist him in those investigations, and Drucker accepted. However, the U.S. entry into World War II forced the pair to considerably reduce the scope of their research project. They would be limited to three months of excavations in 1942, and a similar period of time in 1943. And although Matt Stirling was eager to excavate at La Venta, it turned out that during the first field season Phil Drucker ended up doing almost all of the fieldwork by himself.

The 1942 Field Season

Drucker had never been to La Venta, so the region and the site were new to him. He could have yielded to temptation and immediately started excavations in the area of the earthen pyramid mound and monuments, but as an experienced and thoughtful field archaeologist, he didn't. He first set out to obtain some basic details about the nature of the archaeological remains at the site, most of which was still covered by dense stands of tropical forest. Although he was on his own, he hired a small crew of eight to ten local laborers and undertook a surface survey along the linear "island's" four-mile extent. His objective was to ascertain the distribution of archaeological features and surface artifacts there. The survey revealed eight areas with significant potsherd concentrations visible on the ground surface.

Drucker's next step was to "test" those eight areas by excavating trenches in each one until he reached sterile soil (i.e., soil devoid of artifacts or other evidence of human presence). For each trench he made notes on the character of the deposits being unearthed and took a "rough count" of the density of potsherds in each deposit. Because he had no trained assistants to help him, it was impossible for him to create any kind of detailed site map; thus general sketch maps had to suffice to record the locations of the excavated test units. From the information obtained by the testing excavations, Drucker selected three site areas for more careful stratigraphic trenching. The ceramic typology and ceramic sequence that he developed from those latter excavations remain today as the major published description of La Venta ceramics, even though they are greatly out of date. By the time Drucker's preliminary research was finished, only three weeks remained in the field season. He decided to dedicate those remaining few weeks to the excavation of some of La Venta's mounds for the purpose of "recovering data bearing on the ceremonial, and . . . artistic aspects of the culture." However, the area he selected for that work was not one of the eight areas he had just finished test-trenching and analyzing. Instead he chose a group of low mounds located immediately to the north of the site's heavily forested 100 ft. (c. 30 m) tall pyramid. The mounds flanked a rectangular plaza nearly 475 ft. (145 m) in length. Drucker designated that mound-and-plaza arrangement as "Complex A," and the pyramid as Mound C-1 of "Complex C" (fig. 5.1).

Two factors might have influenced his decision to work on the low mounds of Complex A. One was their close proximity to the large pyramid. The second may have been that the line of stone columns mentioned by Blom and La Farge was visible near the north end of Complex A (see fig. 2.7). But whatever considerations led Drucker to excavate at Complex A in those final three weeks, it was an extremely fortuitous choice.

Tropical forest obscured a great deal of Complex A's architectural layout. Nevertheless it was apparent to Drucker that Complex A had a general symmetry along a north-south central axis. That axis, 8 degrees west of true north, ran through the center of the site's pyramid and likewise bisected the arrangement of the mounds within Complex A. Drucker decided to excavate along that central axis, beginning with the mound he labeled as A-2, situated at the far north of the complex. Once again, whether uncommonly good luck or tremendous scholarly insight led him to that decision, the results were extraordinary. The discoveries

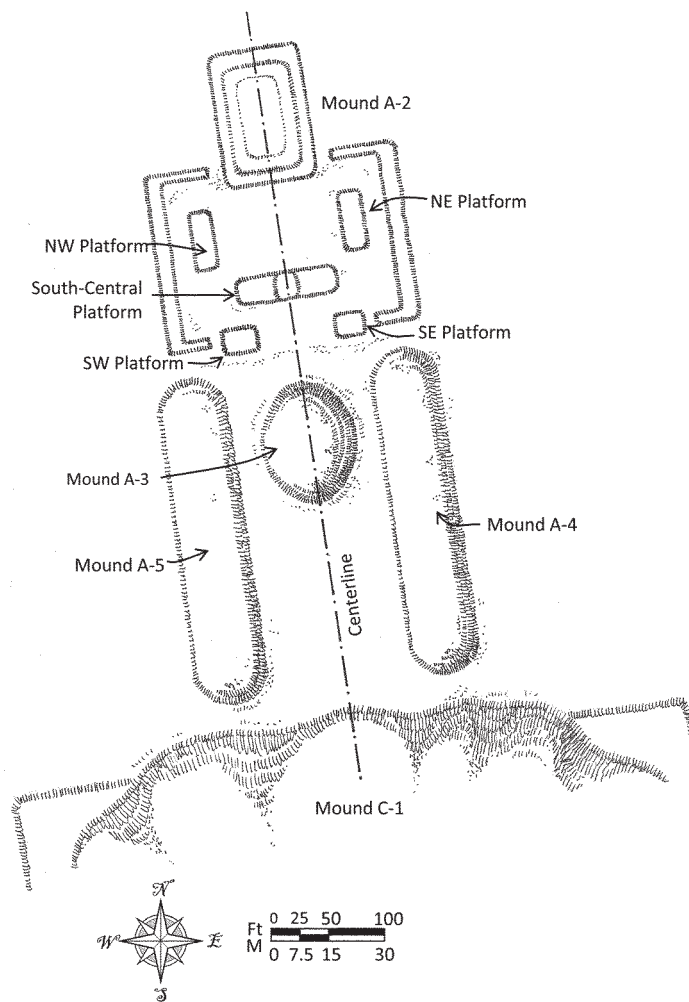


Fig. 5.1. General map of Complex A, La Venta, showing the centerline (8 degrees west of true north) and major mounds and platforms. Mound C-1 and Complex C begin at the base of the map. Scale is approximate. Drawing by Michael Volk.



Fig. 5.2. La Venta Complex A centerline excavations, looking south at Tomb A/ Monument 7, a structure built from natural basalt columns. The sandstone sarcophagus, Tomb B/Monument 6, partially opened, can be seen behind Tomb A. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, ID number heizer_1159; Richard Hewitt Stewart/National Geographic Stock.

made in those three final weeks of the field season astonished the world of Mexican archaeology.

Mound A-2 was approximately 100 ft. (30 m) long and 12 ft. (3.7 m) high. Near its northern edge the tops of five basalt columns—positioned side by side in an east-west line—could be seen protruding from its top surface. The central axis of Complex A bisected the mound, so Drucker had his workers begin excavating a 15 ft. (4.6 m) wide trench along that axial line. Discoveries came quickly. When the trench reached the line of the five basalt columns, it showed them to be leaning southward to form the sloping northern end of a very large rectangular box-like structure or chamber (fig. 5.2). The structure, constructed entirely of thirty-eight naturally shaped basalt columns, was approximately 14 ft. long, 10 ft. wide, and 6.5 ft. high ($4.3 \times 3 \times 2$ m). Its roof was made up of eleven more columns laid horizontally. The nearest source of natural columnar basalt is in the Tuxtla Mountains, 100 mi. (161 km) to the northwest. Many of the columns making up the structure were nearly 12 ft. (3.7 m) in length and weighed over a ton each, so bringing them all to La Venta had surely been a great task. Drucker referred to the

structure as Tomb A, while somewhat later Stirling labeled it as Monument 7, following the same numbering system he applied to the site's stelae and altars.

Twelve feet (3.7 m) farther to the south of the stone chamber, the Mound A-2 trench came upon a large, flat, carved sandstone slab lying just below the mound's surface. The slab was over 10 ft. long, 3.5 ft. wide, and 8 in. thick ($3 \times 1.1 \times 0.2$ m). Drucker momentarily set aside any further excavations of the basalt column chamber and had his workers instead concentrate their efforts on the large sandstone slab. To everyone's surprise, the slab turned out to be the lid of a large sandstone sarcophagus-like box, approximately 9 ft. in length and 3 ft. in both height and width ($2.7 \times 0.9 \times 0.9$ m). The exterior of the sarcophagus was carved in low relief with the image of a legged zoomorphic creature (fig. 5.3). The discovery was labeled as Tomb B (and later also as Monument 6). Although early publications referred to the supernatural image on the sarcophagus as a "*tigre*" or "jaguar," a common early interpretation for many of the motifs occurring in Olmec art, the consensus today is that the image represents a supernatural crocodilian creature.

Amazingly, just as those finds were in the process of being uncov-

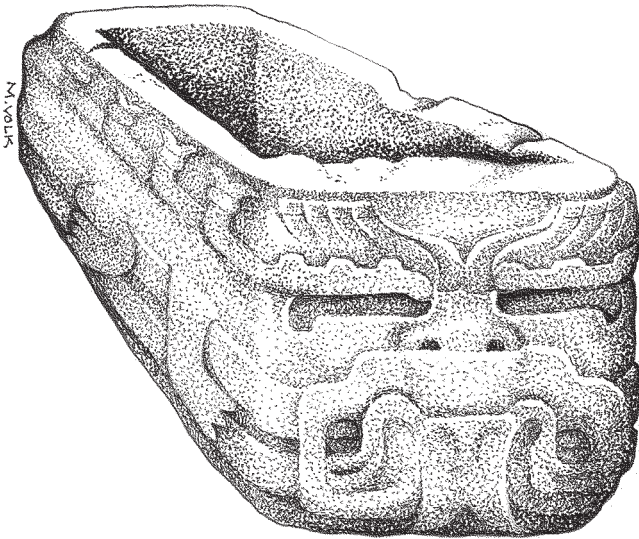


Fig. 5.3. La Venta Tomb B/Monument 6, a sandstone sarcophagus carved with the image of a supernatural crocodilian creature. Drawing by Michael Volk.

ered, Matt and Marion Stirling showed up at La Venta. They were accompanied by National Geographic Society photographer Richard Stewart. The Stirlings were on their way to an anthropological conference in Chiapas, Mexico, but had first come to La Venta to see the results of the initial field season. Of course, their timing and luck couldn't have been better. Drucker immediately drafted them to help in excavating the two exciting discoveries in Mound A-2.

The Stirlings first turned their attention to Tomb B, the sandstone sarcophagus. Upon carefully removing the lid, they discovered that the interior of the sarcophagus was filled with red clay. Matt Stirling set to work excavating and removing the clay, and near the base of the interior he uncovered a pair of jade earspools and four other jade artifacts. The earspools were positioned as if they had been worn by someone once interred within the box, but Matt could not find any traces of human bone. He felt certain that an important personage had been laid to rest within the sarcophagus but that any human remains had completely disintegrated. Drucker, on the other hand, was skeptical because no bone or teeth fragments had been discovered. Moreover, there were no discolorations in the clay that filled the great sandstone box, such as might have been caused by a decomposing body.

By the time Stirling had finished excavating the interior of the sarcophagus, Drucker's workmen had completely uncovered the exterior of the columnar basalt structure. The five slanting basalt columns at its north end (the "doorway") were removed, revealing an interior apparently intentionally filled with the same red clay as in the sarcophagus. Matt Stirling took the chamber interior as his next task. Careful excavation revealed a floor made of limestone slabs (fig. 5.4), one area of which was stained by red pigment. Within that stained area were numerous jade artifacts, but also this time a few visible bone fragments. The stone structure had been a tomb! Intriguingly, among the splinters of bones on the tomb floor were some teeth—the deciduous teeth of a juvenile.

Archaeological data are rarely clear-cut and indisputable. Phil Drucker and Matt Stirling had both carefully studied the artifact distributions on the limestone floor of the columnar basalt tomb, but they could not agree on how many individuals had been interred there. Drucker interpreted the remains as comprising two "bundle burials," each containing "at least one individual," perhaps "juveniles." Stirling, on the other hand, believed that there had been "three persons placed with heads to the south." We will probably never know which description is correct, for neither archaeologist published any drawings or photos showing the locations of the bone fragments or of the distribution of



Fig. 5.4. Workers excavate the partial limestone slab floor of the interior chamber of Tomb A. Richard Hewitt Stewart/National Geographic Stock.

the individual artifacts on the tomb floor, and the field notes from those excavations have not been found.

Scholars today recognize that some types of jewelry and objects were “gender specific,” meaning they had apparently been worn or used only by males or only by females. In that sense they can be useful as gender identifiers in instances of poorly preserved human remains. It is interesting to consider Drucker’s two “bundle burials” from that perspective. Distinctive objects associated with “Bundle 1” included a small greenstone figurine of a seated individual, likely male; a greenstone figurine of a standing person; a jade replica of a clamshell; two jade rectangles with engraved motifs; and a polished iron ore mirror. Jade clamshell replicas seem to be a female-related jewelry item. “Bundle 2” included a jade figurine of a seated female with a tiny iron ore mirror pectoral

(breast ornament), a greenstone figurine of a standing male person, a pair of small jade hands, a broken greenstone “awl,” a large fossil shark’s tooth, a jade replica of a stingray spine, and six actual stingray spines. Stone awls, stingray spines or their replicas, and shark’s teeth are all considered to be related to male ritual bloodletting (the piercing of the body to draw blood in sacrifice). Therefore, even in the absence of written notes, it can be inferred that the columnar basalt tomb contained a male (Bundle 2) and a female (Bundle 1).

The serendipitous timing of Drucker’s discovery of the crocodilian sarcophagus and basalt tomb at the moment the Stirlings arrived for their brief visit is remarkable. It was also very fortunate to have Dick Stewart there to document the finds with his photographs. The group stayed only briefly, departing almost as quickly as they had arrived. They left to attend a conference of Mexican and U.S. scholars in the nearby state of Chiapas. The conference theme was “Mayas and Olmecs.” There they listened to archaeologist Alfonso Caso, artist Miguel Covarrubias, and other premier Mexican scholars discuss their initial opinions on the Olmecs and on the Olmec art style. When Matt Stirling’s chance to speak came, he must have astonished the assembled scholars with his descriptions of the magnificent discoveries he and Drucker had unearthed only a few days earlier at La Venta.

There is, unfortunately, a sad postscript to one of the major discoveries made in 1942. The sandstone crocodilian sarcophagus was a unique find, and over the decades it has quite properly held a prominent place in the literature as a significant example of Olmec art and iconography. Few people realize, however, that this important stone carving no longer exists! At the end of the 1942 field season it was apparently left unprotected and exposed to the elements, and it may have remained that way into the 1950s. Sandstone is not a highly durable type of rock, and by the 1950s the carved features of the crocodilian supernatural had become eroded. Eventually the massive yet fragile sandstone box crumbled into pieces. When oil company bulldozers destroyed portions of Complex A in 1959 (see chapter 7), the fragments of the sarcophagus were apparently part of the earth and debris that were removed by those heavy machines.

La Venta 1943

By the time the 1943 field season was set to begin, Phil Drucker was serving in the U.S. Navy. Matt Stirling called on archaeologist Waldo

Wedel to take Drucker's place at La Venta and continue the research in Complex A. This time Matt Stirling was able to participate more actively in the fieldwork.

Their investigations started by completing work on Mound A-2. The previous year's excavations had uncovered a pile of eleven basalt columns lying horizontally in the space between the sandstone sarcophagus and the basalt tomb, but there had not been time to investigate them. Therefore, one of the first tasks in 1943 was the removal of those columns and an excavation of that area. The new excavations showed that the basalt columns had been stacked horizontally above what seemed to be another burial. The grave area was defined by a large zone of red pigment that contained 108 objects of jade, including 35 jade celts (axes), 64 jade beads, a small jade skull, a polished hematite mirror, and 2 ear spools with pendant jade fangs. The latter seem to be male gender items. However, although the jewelry and earspools were properly positioned, as if they had been worn by an interred person, once again no trace of human bone was discovered by the excavators.

Stirling and Wedel continued Drucker's original central-axis excavation strategy, trenching southward in Complex A along that line. Their work soon uncovered two small monuments (Mon. 12, 13) and several small caches of jade celts. Their next major discovery, however, did not lie on the central axis. Mound A-2, with its columnar basalt tomb, sits at the north end of an unusual and intriguing architectural feature within Complex A, the "Ceremonial Court." This is a large rectangular area approximately 190 ft. wide (east-west) by 130 ft. in length (north-south) (58×40 m) that is partially delineated by an incomplete "fence" of vertical basalt columns. Some of those columns were the "pillars" noted in 1925 by Blom and La Farge. Two mounds were visible on the south side of the court, and both were topped by small rectangular enclosures of the same kinds of basalt columns. These were initially labeled the East and West Platforms (or bastions). In 1955, when excavations revealed three additional low mounds buried below the present-day surface within the court interior, the East and West Platforms were renamed Southeast and Southwest Platforms (see chapter 7).

In 1942 Drucker had quickly excavated a test pit in the Southwest Platform, with unspectacular results. Therefore, Stirling and Wedel selected the adjacent Southeast Platform for investigation. Their excavation was more sizeable and detailed, revealing the mound to be a rectangular platform made entirely of reddish adobe (sun-dried mud) blocks and rising over 7 ft. (2 m) high. The basalt column enclosure that formed its upper perimeter measured slightly over 25 ft. in length and

20 ft. in width (7.6×6 m), and was composed of fifty-eight columns. Although the columns each averaged about 8 ft. (2.4 m) in length, they had been deeply embedded into the layers of adobe blocks for stability, so that the actual visible stone column enclosure had a height of perhaps only 3 or 4 ft. (0.9–1.2 m).

When the excavations reached the base of the adobe block platform, Wedel and Stirling decided to continue downward and explore the thick layer of clay below the platform. They had penetrated only another six inches into that clay layer when they came upon a cache of twenty jadeite and serpentine celts and a concave polished iron ore mirror. The cache lay directly beneath the center of the platform, and the celts had been laid side by side in groups to form a cross-like arrangement oriented to the cardinal directions. The small iron ore mirror lay in the north arm of the cruciform cache, while the central area of the cross was marked by a darkish circular area of soil containing traces of “charred or oxidized wood.” This last discovery led Wedel to conclude that perhaps a circular wooden disk had been placed there.

Wedel and Stirling continued their excavations deeper still below the platform mound. It was slow, difficult work, but 6 ft. (1.8 m) below the base of the adobe brick mound they came upon an astonishing construction—a very large mosaic “pavement” created from 433 large, carefully shaped green serpentine blocks set into a thin layer of tar (bitumen, or *chapaote* [see also chapter 18]). The mosaic, over 15 ft. (4.6 m) long on each side, seemed to create a large supernatural face that both Stirling and Wedel referred to as a “jaguar mask” (fig. 5.5). That find would become one of La Venta’s most significant, yet most enigmatic, discoveries.

Closer examination of the serpentine mosaic “mask” revealed that its construction was artistically complex. Its circumference had been rimmed with yellow clay, while the interior “facial elements” were packed with bluish clay. In addition, four large, diamond-shaped “fringe” elements were appended to the mosaic’s south side; each contained a “greenish-gray clay mottled and streaked with purplish red.” To Wedel the mosaic “presented a most striking picture—particularly so, when the entire surface was cleaned with water and the colors came out in all their richness.” The pavement’s thin matrix of tar drew a statement from Matt Stirling that would soon prove ironic. Oil exploration was taking place near La Venta, and he commented: “Imagine our surprise on finding asphalt on a day when our neighbors, the drillers, were striking oil at 5,400 feet! Credit for the ‘discovery well’ evidently must



Fig. 5.5. Waldo Wedel and three assistants excavate the mosaic pavement of serpentine blocks discovered beneath the Southeast Platform. Richard Hewitt Stewart/National Geographic Stock.

go to the ancients.” Little did Stirling imagine how the oil prospectors’ discovery would soon have a severe impact on the ancient Olmec center of La Venta.

The mosaic pavement was laid out on a thin layer of tough yellow clay, beneath which was very compact stone rubble. The archaeologists attempted to continue their excavations downward into the rubble, but it proved nearly impenetrable and they soon abandoned the task.

Wedel and Stirling continued work on the central axis trench, extending it to the south of the Ceremonial Court and through a low and rather inconspicuous mound, A-3, that was situated essentially at the midpoint of the Complex A axis. At the south end of Mound A-3, just about 5 ft. (1.5 m) below the ground surface, their trench unearthed the incomplete remains of another nearly identical serpentine mosaic pave-

ment. (A third mosaic pavement would be unearthed in Complex A ten years later [chapter 7].)

The mosaic pavements were clearly exciting finds. However, there was a third major discovery made in 1943 that has received very little attention in the many pages written about La Venta over the past half-century. That discovery took place near the center of Mound A-3. It was an immense crypt, 17 ft. long, 6 ft. wide, and 4 ft. in height ($5.2 \times 1.8 \times 1.2$ m), constructed of large sandstone slabs forming the sides and top of a rectangular box. Even today it remains the largest stone crypt grave known from that early time period in Mexico. The crypt was oriented perpendicular to the mound's (and Complex A's) north-south axis. Excavation of the clay-filled interior revealed thirty-seven greenstone celts arranged around the edges of the crypt, many of them in pairs. Jade earspools with fang pendants, a jade awl (both male gender items), and what looked like a waistband of jade beads lay upon the crypt's red-stained floor. The jewelry objects were positioned as if they had adorned the body of an adult. Once again, no bones could be detected.

Wedel, who excavated the large crypt, had doubts that it had ever contained an actual burial. As we have seen, other "burials" lacking traces of human bone but seemingly delineated by the placement of jade costume and other objects atop a layer of red pigment are known at La Venta. Those include the jades discovered in front of Altar 4 by Stirling, the jades within the sandstone crocodilian sarcophagus (Monument 6) excavated in 1942, and the "burial" beneath the pile of eleven basalt columns in Mound A-2 excavated in 1943. While those three "burials" were never adequately published, the Mound A-3 "burial" and its associated artifacts were well documented by Wedel in both a drawing and photographs, and those records enable a reexamination of the data.

Although the artifacts are indeed laid out to be "anatomically correct," as if positioned on a body, the earspools and the waistband of jade beads are too neatly arranged in the grave. They seem to have been carefully deposited on one horizontal plane—the crypt's floor—rather than having been objects that once adorned the raised contours of an actual buried corpse and later simply fell to the crypt floor as the body decomposed. Wedel's doubts that these features represented actual burials, and similar doubts later expressed by Drucker and others who have studied the evidence, all seem well founded. Many scholars now apply terms such as "pseudo-burials" or "surrogate burials" to describe those finds at La Venta. Significantly, all of La Venta's known pseudo-burials contain male jewelry items.

The two field seasons had been highly successful, but as with many archaeological projects, in the end the fieldwork had actually raised more questions than answers. The chronological placement of La Venta and its Olmec inhabitants within the span of Mesoamerican prehistory remained a subject of debate. Drucker was one of a group of scholars who felt that the Olmecs were a Classic period culture contemporaneous with the early Classic Maya (i.e., AD 300–600). Matthew Stirling, along with Mexican scholars Alfonso Caso and Miguel Covarrubias, believed that the Olmecs predated the Classic Maya. The chronology question would remain unresolved for another decade.

The discoveries from the 1942–1943 excavations at Complex A were indeed magnificent, but they should also be put into perspective. When the excavations began, the only things known of the Olmecs were the colossal stone heads and the few monuments that had been found earlier at La Venta and Tres Zapotes by Blom and La Farge and by Matt and Marion Stirling. The scholarly world waited to see what the La Venta excavations would produce, and the answers came in the form of the basalt column tomb, the sandstone sarcophagus, the Mound A-3 crypt, two amazing buried serpentine mosaic pavements, and many impressive jade artifacts. Because no other significant data on the Olmecs would appear for many years to come, the La Venta Complex A finds constituted nearly everything then known about the Olmecs. For that reason, in the minds of scholars and the public, the fabulous monuments, serpentine pavements, rich tombs, and quantities of jade jewelry at La Venta were taken to be representative of Olmec culture in general, across both time and space. But were they really representative? I often wonder what our perception of the Olmecs would have been if in the final three weeks of the 1942 field season Phil Drucker had decided to excavate an area of La Venta other than Complex A—an area that might have yielded few spectacular finds, or even nothing notable at all.

CHAPTER 6

Monuments on the Río Chiquito (1945–1946)

Handbags and Heads

During the 1942–1943 research at La Venta, Marion Stirling became good friends with a woman from Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, who occasionally served as a translator for the Stirlings. After the work at La Venta was finished, the two women kept in touch. They eventually embarked on a joint business venture, importing crocodile-skin handbags from Coatzacoalcos to Washington, DC. Their relationship turned out to have an unexpected archaeological bonus.

The Stirlings had spent part of 1945 conducting research in the state of Chiapas, more than 100 mi. (160 km) to the southeast. At the end of their field season they returned to the state capital, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, to pick up the accumulated mail that was being held for them and to begin their return journey to the U.S. by airplane. In that mail was a letter to Marion from her friend. It concerned the handbag business but also mentioned that a man hunting about thirty miles upriver from Coatzacoalcos had reported seeing stone carvings that resembled the Olmec colossal heads Matt had unearthed at La Venta a few years earlier. The Stirlings quickly canceled their plane reservations and hurried to Coatzacoalcos.

As anxious as they were to see the carvings, they nonetheless had to find a way to reach that remote area of southern Veracruz. The nearest settlement to the stones the hunter had seen was the small village of Tenochtitlán, situated on the Río Chiquito, a tributary of the Río Coatzacoalcos. A boat journey on the Coatzacoalcos River would have taken them to that destination, but at that moment no boats were available. They were forced to settle on a less desirable alternative. It would

begin with a train ride into the interior of Veracruz. Once the train reached a stop “near” Tenochtitlán, they would disembark and make the final stage of the journey to the village on horseback.

However, “near” is a word with some ambiguity when applied to rural areas of the world, and it turned out that when Matt and Marion stepped off of the train and into the sun and mid-morning tropical heat, they were in the middle of nowhere and nobody was in sight. They hiked two miles to the nearest settlement, Texistepec, only to be informed that they were still a dozen miles from Tenochtitlán and that no horses were presently available in town to carry them there. However, they were soon befriended by a young man who advised them that he could provide horses in the late afternoon and guide them to Tenochtitlán. Night was already falling when the trio on horseback finally reached the Río Tatagapa and swam the horses across it. By then they were only about three or four miles from their destination, but they became lost in the darkness. Eventually, however, the group heard the faint sound of marimba music in the distance and followed it to the village of Tenochtitlán, a rural hamlet of thatched huts that in no way evoked the majesty of its namesake, the great city of the Aztecs.

The horseback ride had taken seven hours, and the trio’s arrival in Tenochtitlán was unexpected. However, once the village authorities had been located, they received Matt and Marion cordially and invited them to sleep that night on the floor of the local schoolhouse. As the couple prepared to settle down for the night in their new accommodation, they noticed that the schoolhouse held a small collection of local artifacts gathered by the school’s only teacher. The next morning they took a stroll through the village and observed several archaeological mounds. Tenochtitlán was sitting atop an archaeological site! Soon thereafter villagers showed them two large stone carvings. One was a heavily damaged representation of “an anthropomorphic jaguar seated on a human figure lying on its back” (Tenochtitlán Mon. 1) and the other “a crouching and snarling jaguar” (Tenochtitlán Mon. 2). Both carvings were Olmec!

Later that morning Matt and Marion were led on horseback through the tropical forest to the large low plateau that begins about two miles south of the village of Tenochtitlán and rises approximately 200 ft. (60 m) above the surrounding riverine floodplains. Many of the village’s residents had cleared small areas of tropical forest atop the plateau to use as agricultural *milpas* and for cattle grazing. Some of those farmers informed Matt and Marion that they occasionally came upon carved

stones when they were working there. Those carvings were precisely what the Stirlings had come to see. In fact, the very first carved stone that they were taken to see on the plateau made all the hardships of their trip worthwhile. It was a magnificent Olmec colossal stone head nearly 9 ft. (2.7 m) tall (see fig. 8.1). It was larger than any of the five heads that Matt had studied at La Venta and Tres Zapotes!

The villagers of Tenochtitlán referred to the plateau area as the “Terrenos de [lands of] San Lorenzo,” and the archaeological site has since become known as San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, but more frequently simply as San Lorenzo. Although Matt and Marion Stirling spent only a day and a half there, Matt commented that the visit was “strenuous.” Why? For one thing, the heat and humidity in that region are extreme. Further, during their brief time at the site the Stirlings were shown over a dozen Olmec monuments, all of which took time to clear off, photograph, sketch, and describe in their notebooks. The stone carvings they were shown were not clustered in one area, either, but instead were scattered across the immense plateau, which we now know is approximately .75 mi. long from north to south and .5 mi. wide east to west (1.2×0.8 km).

Yet however strenuous the exploration may have been for them, each new monument was an exciting surprise and a significant contribution to Olmec archaeology. Among the many carvings revealed to the Stirlings during their visit was a massive tabletop altar-throne similar to those they had seen at La Venta (Mon. 14; fig. 6.1) and a surprisingly large “decapitated” stone statue head (Mon. 6) over 3 ft. (c. 1 m) in height. The body of the statue, if it existed, has never been found but would perhaps have been the largest statue ever created by the Olmecs (as noted earlier, colossal stone heads had never been part of statues).

However, the farmers guiding the pair soon had another surprise for them. They told them, “Now we will see ‘El Rey’ [the King].” They led the Stirlings along paths through the tropical vegetation for another 500 yards (c. 460 m) until they came to one of the many deep *barrancas* (ravines) that cut into the plateau. There they showed them a second colossal head. To Matt Stirling, the 9.4 ft. (2.9 m) tall head was “the most impressive of all the San Lorenzo monuments . . . the colossal head to end all colossal heads” (fig. 6.2). He labeled this newest find “San Lorenzo Colossal Head 1,” and the head seen earlier in the day, although found first, as “Colossal Head 2.”

As magnificent as those discoveries were, a third discovery equals them in significance. The find was made in another *barranca* 300 yards



Fig. 6.1. Altar-throne, Monument 14, San Lorenzo. Museum of Anthropology, Xalapa. Photo courtesy of Carl Wendt.



Fig. 6.2. Marion Stirling (left), Philip Drucker (right), and unidentified man (center) examine Colossal Head 1 at San Lorenzo, 1946. Richard Hewitt Stewart/National Geographic Stock.

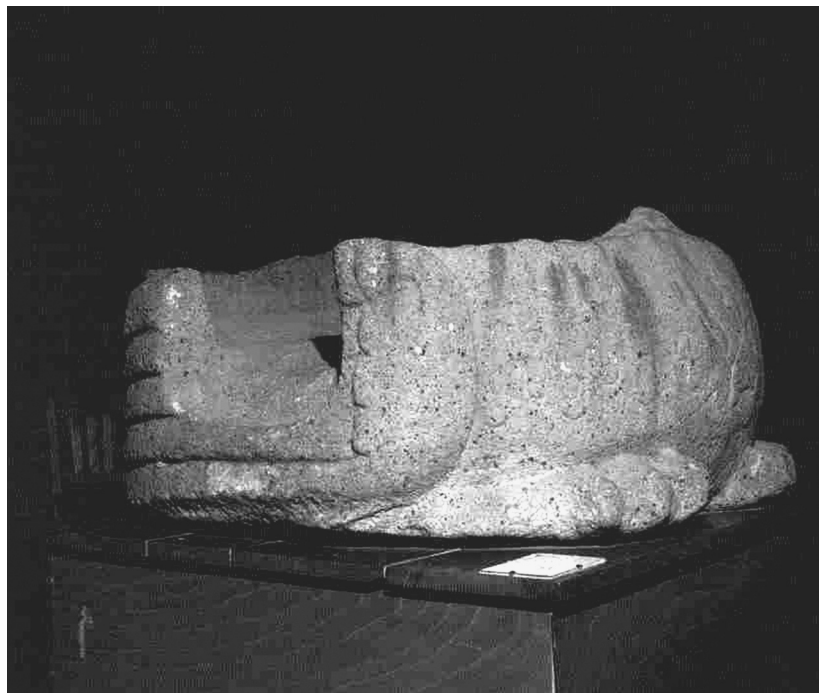


Fig. 6.3. Monument 9, San Lorenzo, a stone duck fount (missing its head) with a side notch to accommodate a U-shaped aqueduct stone. Museum of Anthropology, Xalapa. Photo by the author.

(c. 270 m) to the west of Head 1. “In a steep ravine with a small stream of water” the Stirlings were shown a number of trough-shaped stones, each about 32 in. (80 cm) long. Matt recognized their importance immediately, theorizing that they had been “the remains of an ancient aqueduct, a most surprising new feature of [Olmec] culture.” The Stirlings were then taken to see a very unusual stone carving nearby, a large stone basin shaped in the form of a duck (Mon. 9). Importantly, carved into the side of the stone duck is a U-shaped opening that exactly fits an “aqueduct” trough stone (fig. 6.3). The stone duck had apparently been positioned at the end of one of the aqueduct lines. In other words, it had been a receptacle for aqueduct water.

Thanks to the letter from Marion’s friend concerning crocodile handbags, the Stirlings had discovered what would prove to be one of the two most important sites in the Olmecs’ domain, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán.

San Lorenzo 1946

Elated by the monuments they had seen in their brief visit to San Lorenzo, the Stirlings returned to the site the following year, 1946, to carry out excavations. Phil Drucker was out of the military and a civilian again, and joined them once more in that research. To begin that work the archaeologists faced a very basic but likewise very difficult question: where to excavate at San Lorenzo? The monuments they had seen in 1945 were dispersed across the immense and densely vegetated plateau. However, during their brief visit Matt and Marion had seen a group of very low mounds near the center of the plateau, and the arrangement of the mounds reminded them of La Venta's Complex A, although on a greatly reduced scale. They had also been shown a very eroded Olmec statue (Mon. 12) that had been found in that same area. Matt Stirling and Phil Drucker decided to concentrate the 1946 excavations on that area of the site.

After several arduous months of excavating in the heat and humidity, their results were negligible and highly disappointing. The extreme good fortune and exciting finds that the two archaeologists had experienced several years earlier in their excavations at La Venta were not repeated in the 1946 San Lorenzo excavations. The disappointment felt by the investigators may explain the fact that most of the artifacts recovered by that fieldwork went unstudied, and no detailed excavation report was ever published.

By the end of the project, though, over a dozen additional Olmec stone monuments, including three more colossal heads (3, 4, 5), had been recorded. Furthermore, Stirling and Drucker had carried out excavations at the village of Tenochtitlán and had also explored a third nearby site, Potrero Nuevo. At the latter, today recognized as part of the Loma del Zapote site, they were shown four Olmec stone monuments.

Almost a decade would pass before the next major Olmec research initiative. And, because the 1946 excavations at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán had provided no significant new archaeological data on the Olmecs, the 1942–1943 finds from La Venta's Complex A remained the primary data set for interpreting Olmec culture.

CHAPTER 7

The Return to La Venta (1955)

Complex A Revisited

Philip Drucker had intended to devote the final three weeks of the 1942 research at La Venta to “structural excavations,” that is, the mound architecture of Complex A. However, the discovery of the columnar basalt tomb and sandstone sarcophagus in Mound A-2, and the time and effort expended on their excavation, meant that his goal of exploring architecture would go largely unfulfilled. Then the Second World War prevented Drucker from participating in the 1943 excavations and pursuing the architecture goal. Although he joined Stirling at San Lorenzo in 1946, La Venta was obviously on his mind. He strongly believed in the importance of La Venta’s Complex A and that it merited far more thorough and larger scale excavations. Therefore, in 1955 he initiated a new project dedicated to uncovering data on “patterns of construction, or architecture” in Complex A. The excavations would take place over a period of slightly more than three months and would employ a crew of approximately fifty local workers, which Drucker felt was “a labor force adequate to move enough dirt to yield some conclusive results.”

Drucker invited a longtime friend, archaeologist Robert Heizer from the University of California–Berkeley, to assist him in this new research effort. The two had known each other since their graduate student days at Berkeley and had worked together on archaeological projects in California. Heizer was an experienced archaeologist and highly respected for his research into the prehistory of California and Nevada. Although he had never excavated in Mexico and did not speak Spanish, he was skilled at interpreting stratigraphy—reading the different layers of deposition at a site—an ability that would be needed in the Complex A

excavations. Also joining the new project were archaeologists Robert Squier, Pierre Agrinier, and Eduardo Contreras.

Drucker applied to Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) for an excavation permit, and Heizer began learning some basic Spanish. The permit was granted several months in advance of the intended 1955 starting date, but contained a surprise—a clause requiring the project to consolidate or stabilize any architecture found. Although consolidation of architecture is a standard requirement in Mexican permits today, it may not have been included in the permits that Drucker and Stirling had received in the 1940s. In any case, Drucker had not anticipated the consolidation requirement. His project would be studying the architecture of Complex A, and Drucker knew from his earlier excavations there that much of the architecture would be made of clay and sand or adobe bricks, not stone.

Consolidating a stone structure is not particularly difficult, but Drucker was puzzled over how they could consolidate adobe architecture and protect it from the tropical rains of that region. Therefore, for the next few months he and Heizer frantically searched in the U.S. for some type of liquid chemical that would waterproof any adobe structures that they might uncover, and they began experimenting. They obtained modern adobe bricks and carried out waterproofing tests using a variety of chemical compounds that were suggested to them. Since they had no laboratory, they conducted their tests in the bathroom of Heizer's house in Berkeley! Their trials consisted of placing treated adobe bricks on the floor of Heizer's bathroom shower and submitting them to a thorough drenching. Mrs. Heizer was apparently not pleased. Nonetheless, in spite of their efforts, none of their tests were ever successful, and when Drucker and Heizer departed for Mexico they still lacked a solution to the requirement of consolidation.

A dozen years had passed since the previous research there, and when the archaeologists arrived at La Venta, Complex A had been reclaimed by jungle vegetation. However, an even greater change had taken place, for La Venta was no longer isolated. A major oil field had been discovered close by, roads were being built, and an oil boomtown was developing near the western edge of the site.

The research team's first task was to clear Complex A of its renewed cover of trees and undergrowth so that their excavations could start, but as that work progressed, an obstacle quickly became apparent. La Venta is situated near the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, and over the millennia since the Olmecs lived there thick deposits of wind-blown sands from



Fig. 7.1. La Venta, March 1955. An oil company bulldozer removes drift sand and 1942–1943 back-dirt piles from Complex A at the request of the archaeologists. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, ID number heizer_0304.

the Gulf had accumulated over portions of the site, including Complex A. The sand was never directly mentioned as an annoyance in the 1940s research reports, but the 1955 research would be investigating a much more extensive area of Complex A, and the 4 to 5 ft. (c. 1–1.5 m) thick overburden of drift sand had to be removed.

Shoveling away the sand was time-consuming work for the laborers, and for a period of time it seemed that the necessity of sand removal would delay the planned excavations by many weeks. Drucker sought help from the nearby Mexican oil company (today, *Petróleos Mexicanos*, or Pemex) oil facility. The officials there agreed to assist and sent bulldozers to Complex A. The heavy equipment quickly removed the layer of drift sand. At Drucker's request the bulldozers also removed the piles of back-dirt from the 1942–1943 excavations that remained heaped in Complex A and were covering areas the archaeologists now wished to excavate (fig. 7.1).

Not many people are aware, however, that Drucker went one step further. He also asked the oil company to bulldoze a deep trench within Complex A, from the 1942–1943 centerline excavations eastward to

the edge of the complex. He explained that “it gave us an east-west cut across the Court, which we might not have been able to get had we been forced to depend entirely on hand labor.” He also noted that the trench “for a matter of convenience, did not run quite perpendicular to the centerline of the site. However, it was only a few degrees off.” Actually, it was 11 degrees off.

Depending upon one’s point of view, the bulldozed trench can be regarded as a pragmatic, time-saving decision by Drucker, or alternatively as a rather drastic and destructive method of excavating. In requesting the trench, Drucker felt “reasonably sure” that there were no offerings or other significant features that would be damaged by a machine-made cut in that area. However, his belief was not entirely accurate. The project’s final report on the excavations includes the comment that an offering of celts discovered later in excavations in that area had been “disturbed” by the bulldozing to such an extent that the complete layout of the artifacts could not be ascertained. Furthermore, the bulldozer trench cut off much of the top portion of the eastern half of the Ceremonial Court’s previously undetected South-Central Platform, which had been buried by the drift sand. Were those the only casualties of the bulldozing? We will never know.

The bulldozer trench nevertheless provided the archaeologists with an east-west cut over 100 ft. (30 m) long and up to 7 ft. (2 m) deep. It exposed precisely the type of data that Drucker was seeking in the 1955 research, a series of layered floors that represented consecutive construction episodes in the history of Complex A. Those successive clay floors, one above the other, were the result of periodic resurfacings over a long period of time of the Ceremonial Court, which had once been an important plaza area. Frequently the floor layers were of different colors—for example, a white clay floor overlaid by a pink clay floor that in turn was overlaid by a red clay floor, and so forth. Importantly, some of the colored clays used for these purposes were apparently not local to the La Venta area but had been brought to the site from elsewhere in the region.

Identifying the layering of floors exposed in a trench wall might seem to be a straightforward and relatively easy task, but the opposite is usually the case. Trench sidewalls quickly dry out and appear homogeneous in color or texture. They need to be redampened for even gross details to become apparent. Fortunately Heizer and the other archaeologists were experts at studying these sidewall profiles and at extracting important details from them. The Complex A sidewalls were frequently re-

moistened using an ordinary portable garden sprayer. In many instances the archaeologists were able to ascertain important details, such as a set of floor layers they termed the “water-laid deposits” that bore evidence of a sandy clay floor having been exposed to rain for a significant period of time.

“Massive Offerings”

Drucker had returned to La Venta with the benefit of over a dozen years of reflection on the previous research, and he had various ideas and hunches that he intended to pursue. One concerned the Southwest Platform (in 1942–1943 termed the West Platform or West Bastion) in the Ceremonial Court. In 1942 he had excavated a small test pit into the center of that structure, but it had revealed very little other than the fact that the platform had been constructed of adobe bricks and was over 7 ft. (2 m) in height. The more significant discovery of that 1942 pit was a cache of six serpentine celts deposited beneath the base of the adobe brick platform. When Drucker returned to La Venta in 1955, he and Heizer began their work by resuming excavations of the Southwest Platform (fig. 7.2). He had a strong hunch that beneath the adobe structure there would be a duplicate of the large mosaic pavement that Stirling and Wedel had found in 1943, below the adjacent Southeast Platform. Once again his intuition paid off, but to a far greater extent than he could have imagined.

Approximately 5 ft. (1.5 m) below the base of the adobe brick platform his workers came upon a layer of olive-colored clay, and it soon became apparent that the clay layer enveloped the mosaic mask that Drucker had suspected they would find there. The mask was practically identical in size and design to the Southeast Platform’s (fig. 7.3; see fig. 5.5), but the coloration was slightly different. In this mosaic the appended “fringes” were filled with yellow clay, and the face’s large “mouth” was filled with cinnamon-colored sand.

In 1943, when Stirling and Wedel discovered the mosaic pavement below the Southeast Platform, they attempted to excavate the area below the mosaic. However, the mosaic had been laid out atop a compact mix of stone rubble and clay that proved nearly impossible for their work crew to penetrate even with pickaxes. After laboriously digging and penetrating only 2 ft. (60 cm) down into the rubble, they gave up that effort. In contrast, the mosaic unearthed by Drucker and Heizer



Fig. 7.2. Southwest Platform excavations begin in 1955. Note the basalt column enclosure that ringed the platform's upper perimeter. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, ID number heizer_1251.



Fig. 7.3. Archaeologists map the large serpentine mosaic pavement beneath the Southwest Platform. Note in the upper back wall of the excavation the outlines of the platform's adobe brick construction. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, ID number heizer_0099.

below the Southwest Platform in 1955 did not lie upon a base of rubble. Instead it had been constructed atop a bed of compacted clay. But under that clay layer was a nearly 1200 sq. ft. (c. 110 sq m) rectangular pavement made up of neatly laid worked serpentine slabs set in a matrix of olive and blue clays. Continued excavation downward meant plotting and removing those slabs by hand, one by one. That strategy changed quickly, for as the work progressed a further surprise was revealed: the slab pavement they were slowly removing was merely the uppermost of what would turn out to be twenty-eight irregularly arranged layers of such serpentine slabs and chunks, extending downward for a total of 17 ft. (5.2 m). Furthermore, a careful examination of the side-walls of the excavation revealed that this massive feature of serpentine blocks had been placed within an equally immense pit excavated down into the subsoil by the Olmecs, apparently for the sole purpose of creating and burying this stone “offering.” Because its scale was so extreme compared to the smaller “dedicatory offerings” of celts and other artifacts, the archaeologists labeled this discovery Massive Offering 1.

Massive Offering 1 has become one of the most famous archaeological discoveries in the Olmec realm. It is difficult to comprehend its enormity and significance. Drucker estimated the volume of the layered stones and their clay matrix to have encompassed 20,500 cu. ft. (580.5 cu m). Approximately 1000 tons (907 m tons) of serpentine stone blocks had been utilized. The feat becomes more impressive when it is recognized that the nearest potential source areas of serpentine lie over 60 mi. (100 km) away, and that the stone from which the blocks were made had to have been brought to La Venta by human carriers, primarily by way of a land route. If one carrier were able to transport 100 pounds (45 kg) of stone in a load, twenty thousand carrier/trips over that distance would have been required just to bring the stone to the site.

Furthermore, the colossal expenditure of labor was not invested in constructing a visible monument, such as an edifice or a religious landmark, to be seen and held in awe by future generations. It was a creation made specifically to be buried and remembered in the future, but never seen again. The adobe brick Southwest Platform precisely marked the location of the mosaic and massive offering underneath, but the offering itself would have become a thing of sacred oral tradition among the La Venta Olmecs.

The Complex A centerline trench begun by Drucker in 1942 and continued by Wedel and Stirling in 1943 had been relatively shallow and

had not penetrated deeply into subsurface deposits. Therefore, in the 1955 quest for more data on the architecture and construction history of Complex A, Drucker and his colleagues deepened the trench and in places widened it as well. These efforts brought to light important new discoveries.

In Mound A-2, beneath the red clay layer that had been the “floor” level upon which the crocodilian sarcophagus (Mon. 6) and columnar basalt tomb (Tomb A, Mon. 7) had stood, the deeper excavations encountered unstratified mixed soil. It soon became clear to the archaeologists that this soil was fill dirt within another immense pit dug directly into the center of Mound A-2. The steeply sided pit covered an area of about 1000 sq. ft. (93 sq m) and had a depth of 18 ft. (5.5 m). When the excavations reached the broad flat floor of the pit, the archaeologists uncovered a single layer of serpentine slab pavement. They labeled this find “Massive Offering 2.” Soon thereafter, excavations uncovered a third, even larger, pit that began near the south end of Mound A-2. Labeled “Massive Offering 3,” this pit contained six layers of serpentine blocks.

In 1967 Robert Heizer returned briefly to La Venta to carry out further investigations (see chapter 10). In Complex A, while re-excavating a 15 ft. (4.6 m) section of the upper wall of the pit holding Massive Offering 2, he made an interesting discovery. His close inspection of the pit walls revealed that the upper wall section had originally been smoothed with yellowish clay plaster and then painted. The upper edge of the pit’s interior had a 16 in. (40 cm) wide band of purple-red paint. Below that was a 15 in. (38 cm) wide band with no visible coloration remaining, an 18 in. (46 cm) wide black band, and finally an 18 in. wide band of purple-red pigment as the lower-most band. Heizer’s discovery demonstrates that the pit had not been a hasty construction merely to provide a receptacle for an offering of serpentine blocks, but rather that it had undergone careful construction and decoration.

In total, the 1955 excavations had uncovered three massive offering pits containing serpentine block “pavements,” in addition to the two other mosaic “pavements” found in 1943, making five massive offerings in Complex A. In 1955 Drucker and his associates also spotted evidence of a sixth possible pavement. It was partially exposed in a drainage ditch dug by Pemex about 100 yards (100 m) north of Complex A. It is probable that if time and money had permitted, the archaeologists would have explored that sixth pavement, and re-excavated the Southeast Platform’s mosaic uncovered in 1943 to ascertain if a massive pit with layers of ser-

pentine blocks existed below it as well. However, those explorations did not come to pass. Massive Offering 1 was so immense that its excavation took most of the field season and utilized half of the total workforce. Other excavations had to be scaled back accordingly, and Massive Offerings 2 and 3 were only partially exposed.

The Ritual Frozen in Time

The mosaic pavements and massive offerings at La Venta are overwhelming because of their sheer size. In contrast, “Offering 4,” found in the northeastern area of the Ceremonial Court, is just as extraordinary despite its tiny size. The offering consisted of a grouping of sixteen stone anthropomorphic figurines and six reworked celts (fig. 7.4). The figurines, between 6.3 and 8 in. (16–20 cm) tall, all depict bald individuals with pear-shaped heads. Fifteen are of polished green stone (jadeite and serpentine), and one is made of a coarser stone. Of the six celts, each about 9 in. (23 cm) in length, four appear to be fragments cut from one or more larger engraved objects, and still bear traces of the original engraved designs. What makes Offering 4 a unique and spectacular find is that the figurines and celts had been arranged standing upright in a cluster and positioned as if to intentionally create a scene. The celts were set vertically, apparently to represent stone stelae. In front of them, the figurines seem to depict a procession of four personages walking in single file, approaching a fifth figurine. The other figurines were arrayed to the sides as if they were spectators. The figurine of coarser stone stands alone with its back to the celts/stelae, and the procession passes between him and the other spectators (fig. 7.5). The discovery of this intentionally buried cache of exotic artifacts provides us with a unique miniature diorama, a privileged glimpse of an Olmec ritual frozen in time.

After the small ritual scene had been arranged in the clay fill of the Ceremonial Court floor, it had been covered with white sand and buried. Over the years a series of clay floors further capped and sealed in the figurine group. However, the very careful excavation of Offering 4 by Drucker and his colleagues revealed another surprise: at some later time the La Venta Olmecs had returned to that precise location and cut a hole through the layered floors. They apparently looked in at the top of the figurine group and then refilled the hole. Offering 4 is extraordinary for what it contains, what it represents, and how it was remembered and treated by the Olmecs.



Fig. 7.4. La Venta Offering 4 being excavated by Robert Heizer (upper) and Eduardo Contreras (lower), April 1955. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, ID number heizer_0264.

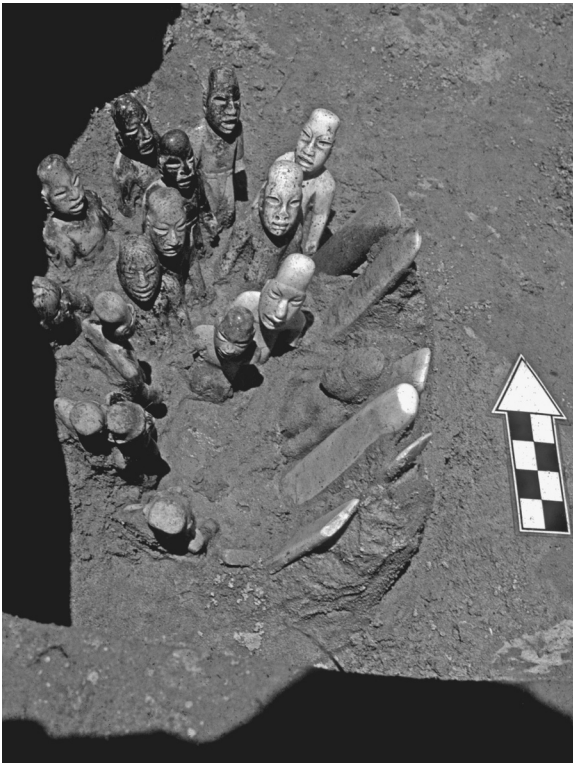


Fig. 7.5. Offering 4: sixteen Olmec stone figurines and six reworked celts, positioned to re-create a ritual scene. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, ID number heizer_1145.

Dating and Updating the Olmecs

Drucker's goals for the 1955 research had been to provide more details on the architecture and construction episodes in Complex A, and in those terms the field season was a success. As Drucker had hoped, the exploration of Complex A had been more thorough and had "move[d] enough dirt to yield some conclusive results." From the trenches and sidewall profiles, he and his colleagues were able to deduce four major construction phases at Complex A. Of at least equal importance was the fact that the 1955 La Venta project was able to take advantage of the recently developed science of radiocarbon dating and provide the first C14 dates for the Olmecs.

All during the La Venta excavations Drucker had maintained his belief that La Venta and the Olmecs were contemporaneous with Maya civilization. His learned opinion was that La Venta was a Classic period settlement, which, like the nearby Classic Maya cities, had been "abandoned about 800 AD." He must therefore have been extremely surprised with the results of the radiocarbon assays submitted by his project, because the nine dates ranged from 1150 BC to 170 BC—all well within the Preclassic period. He and his colleagues interpreted the results as indicating that Complex A had been constructed and used from approximately 800 BC to 400 BC. As will be mentioned in chapter 10, a decade later some of the carbon samples were reanalyzed, and the Complex A dates were revised to 1000–600 BC.

Preserving the Architecture

Whether or not Drucker and Heizer were able to comply with the requirement in their permit to consolidate any architecture they uncovered in their 1955 research is unknown. Their final report asserts a concern for conservation but also comments on their need to sometimes dig some adobe structures "entirely away." Chemical treatment of the adobe or consolidation of the architecture is never mentioned in their reports, or in any of their field notes or accessible post-excavation correspondence. If they did do such work, it is ironic and tragic that it would have been for naught.

Just as their project was ending, the Mexican oil company was beginning to construct an airstrip dangerously close to Complex A. Soon after the archaeologists departed, bulldozers damaged the northwest

corner of Complex A and a portion of Mound A-2. In subsequent years additional bulldozing was carried out at the site to obtain fill dirt for nearby construction projects. That work, together with large-scale looting that began as early as 1956, apparently destroyed most of Complex A. To Drucker and Heizer, it was the “rape of La Venta.” Furthermore, because the oil facilities provided jobs, they attracted workers to the La Venta area. A petroleum boomtown arose that began to swallow the archaeological site. By 1958 most of the site’s stone monuments had been moved to a park in the state capital of Villahermosa, 50 mi. (80 km) away, for their protection.

Heizer’s Dilemma

There is a final surprising twist to the 1955 La Venta research. The project ended in mid-May. Robert Heizer returned to his teaching position at Berkeley, and Philip Drucker, having completed his analysis of the artifacts, went back to his desk job at the Smithsonian Institution. Drucker began writing the report on the La Venta excavations, but he quickly tired of life in Washington, DC. In December, with apparently little notification to anyone, he abruptly resigned from the Smithsonian and departed for Mexico. There he settled in rural southern Veracruz and became a cattle rancher. He married a local woman and started a family. Prior to leaving Washington, Drucker sent Heizer the manuscript pages he had written on the La Venta research.

Drucker had initiated the project, but suddenly Robert Heizer found himself responsible for finishing the project’s final report. Heizer, who wasn’t a Mesoamericanist, momentarily panicked. Nevertheless, he was a good archaeologist, and with the assistance of Robert Squier and others, including Eduardo Contreras, who came to Berkeley and drafted the maps and drawings, managed to produce a very scholarly book-sized report that was published in 1959 by the Bureau of American Ethnology in Washington, DC: *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955*. Some parts of the report received criticism from a few archaeologists, but in view of the circumstances under which it was written, it is a tribute to Robert Heizer’s professionalism that it was finished and published at all.

Heizer and Drucker remained close friends and stayed in contact over the subsequent years, and Heizer occasionally came to Drucker’s aid by sending him medicines for his cattle that Drucker could not obtain or afford in Mexico. However, after a decade in Mexico, Drucker became

concerned about the quality of his children's education and returned to the United States, bringing his family with him. Once more Robert Heizer came to Drucker's assistance, this time by helping him obtain a teaching job in California. The pair reunited at La Venta in 1967 for a small fieldwork project (chapter 10). In 1968 Drucker joined the faculty at the University of Kentucky and taught there until his passing in 1982. One of the best-kept secrets about Philip Drucker is that his adventures as a rancher in southern Veracruz are wonderfully told in the 1969 book *Tropical Frontier*, which he wrote and published under the pseudonym Paul Record.

The goals of the 1955 research at La Venta had favored the study of architecture over any investigations of the Olmecs' lifeways and rituals, and another decade would have to pass before any information on the latter topics would be uncovered. In the absence of data on Olmec lifeways, the Complex A treasures from the 1942–1943 and 1955 excavations would remain the basis for how scholars and the public viewed the Olmecs and their complexity. It was a vision still dominated by colossal stone heads, buried massive offerings, mosaic pavements, jade celts, a columnar basalt tomb, and a sandstone sarcophagus. But as remarkable as those discoveries are, we also now know that most of those features from Complex A date to late in the prehistory of the Olmecs (c. 800–400 BC). They should not be considered representative of the constructions, technology, ritual practices, or achievements of the Olmecs throughout their entire time span.

CHAPTER 8

Of Monuments and Museums (1963, 1968)

A Museum's "Modest" Request

Archaeologist Alfonso Medellín was a native of the state of Veracruz. He was the premier scholar of that state's prehistory, and at times in his career he served as the director of the University of Veracruz's Institute of Anthropology and the director of the university's Museum of Anthropology in the state capital, Xalapa (Jalapa). His most significant contributions to Olmec archaeology in Veracruz occurred in the early 1960s and included excavations at the Olmec center of Laguna de los Cerros. Unfortunately, he never fully published the data from that site. Nonetheless, Medellín's influence and reputation extended across the length and breadth of Veracruz, and he was frequently called upon to solve archaeology-related problems. That is how he became directly involved with San Lorenzo's Colossal Head 2.

The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas, held a major exhibition in 1963, *The Olmec Tradition*. Over the years the Olmecs had gained popular fame as the creators of magnificent colossal stone heads, so it is perhaps not surprising that early in the planning stages for the exhibition, the museum's governing board decreed that "one of the [Olmec] colossal heads . . . would be a striking exhibit [and] . . . a centerpiece of the exhibition." Nobody can disagree with their logic, particularly since the museum had already obtained the Mexican government's promise of cooperation and the loan of various Olmec artifacts for the exhibition. However, it is also obvious today that no one at the Museum of Fine Arts understood the magnitude of the difficulties that would result from their desire for an Olmec colossal head. Ten colossal stone heads were known at that time: one at Tres Zapotes, four at La Venta, and five

at San Lorenzo. The majority of them were on exhibit at regional museums in Veracruz and Tabasco, where they were jealously guarded and never loaned. Even the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City did not have an Olmec colossal head at that time.

Naively undaunted, the Museum of Fine Arts enlisted the assistance of several important U.S. politicians to approach Eusebio Dávalos, the director of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), about the loan of a colossal head. President John F. Kennedy and Vice President (and Texan) Lyndon B. Johnson both wrote letters of support, and the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Thomas Mann, contacted Dávalos directly. Dávalos's recommendation was deceptively simple. Rather than negotiate with one of the Mexican museums for a head, he asked, "Why not bring out the only known remaining head . . . still in the jungle?" He was referring to San Lorenzo Colossal Head 2, the first head Matt and Marion Stirling had been shown on their initial visit to the site in 1945 (fig. 8.1). The plan Dávalos proposed was to remove the colossal stone head from the site, transport it to Houston for the exhibition, and then return it to Mexico City for display at the National Museum of Anthropology. The board of the Houston museum was enthusiastic about the idea. They also decided that a documentary film to visually record retrieving the head and moving it from San Lorenzo would be a splendid addition to the exhibition. Easier said than done, of course.

In June of 1962, one year before the exhibition was to open, the director of the Museum of Fine Arts and the documentary filmmaker agreed to make a very quick trip to San Lorenzo to look at the head and to photograph it in situ. However, nobody at the museum seemed aware that the site of San Lorenzo was nearly as isolated in 1962 as it had been when Stirling and Drucker had excavated there sixteen years earlier. Thus the plans for a quick trip were almost immediately stymied when the museum was advised by their contacts in Mexico that there really were no roads out to San Lorenzo. In addition, access by horseback, they explained, would be quite difficult because the rainy season had started and the floodplains surrounding the plateau were becoming inundated.

However, luck was on the museum's side. The Mexican government tourism agency was headed at that time by the ex-president of Mexico, Miguel Alemán. When he was told of the museum's plight, he had his agency make special arrangements for the museum director and the filmmaker to undertake a one-day trip from Mexico City to San Lo-



Fig. 8.1. Colossal Head 2, San Lorenzo. National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City. Photo by the author.

renzo and back. The trip would be by private plane to Minatitlán, Veracruz. There they would board a helicopter to carry them directly to the San Lorenzo plateau, approximately 25 mi. (40 km) inland.

That solution seemed ideal and the trip got under way, but the pair's misadventures had just begun. Upon arriving at the airport in Minatitlán to begin their helicopter journey, they discovered that nobody

there had ever heard of the village of Tenochtitlán or the San Lorenzo plateau, including the helicopter pilot who was supposed to fly them to the site! Furthermore, all that the museum men were able to offer the pilot as a map to the intended destination was a copy of Matt Stirling's 1955 publication on San Lorenzo monuments. That publication contained only a simple 3.5×4 in. (9×10 cm) general sketch map of the region.

Fortunately for them, both the city of Minatitlán and the Río Coatzacoalcos appeared on that tiny sketch map. Ultimately the pilot was able to follow the river to its junction with the Río Chiquito, thus putting them at least in the vicinity of the plateau. After that, the pilot simply landed the helicopter several times at small settlements to ask directions of the startled villagers. Eventually the group arrived at the San Lorenzo plateau.

However, they were again unprepared for what they found. The plateau was not only immense, but it was also almost entirely covered by dense tropical vegetation. Therefore, even though the colossal head they sought was 9 ft. tall and 6 ft. wide (2.7×1.8 m), it lay partially buried and hidden by vegetation somewhere in an area of over 1 million sq. yards (836,000 sq m). It was like searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

To make the situation even more difficult, unlike Matt Stirling, the museum men had not thought to seek the assistance of villagers from Tenochtitlán to guide them to the head. Instead, they decided on a search methodology of flying back and forth over the plateau, hoping that they could spot the carving from the air. Eventually their quest from the air was successful, but the tropical vegetation prohibited the pilot from landing the helicopter in the immediate vicinity of the colossal head. Therefore the two men still had to make their way by foot through the dense, tick-infested underbrush to locate the monument. That again proved difficult, for once on the ground they couldn't find it. Eventually the pilot had to return to the air and hover above the stone head while the two men attempted to reach it.

When they finally succeeded in reaching the massive stone head, they were elated to see that it would indeed be a magnificent centerpiece for the planned exhibition. Of course, at least one rather major problem still stood in their way—figuring out how to remove the 20-ton monument from the remote and roadless tropical landscape where it had lain for nearly three thousand years.

Although the museum officials were uncertain how to extract the co-

lossal head from San Lorenzo and transport it to Houston, they were anxious to begin the removal process as soon as possible. However, the rainy season would continue through the summer and on into December. When that month eventually arrived so, of course, did the Christmas holidays, which in Mexico extend into January. Thus it was not until February that the anxious museum officials finally received word from Mexico. They were told that the Mexican Marine Ministry (the Mexican navy) had agreed to retrieve the colossal head—as soon as there was “sufficient water” in the river. Their plan was apparently to move the massive carving from the plateau down to the Río Chiquito and place it aboard a boat or barge for transportation to Minatitlán. However, with the Olmec exhibition in Houston scheduled to begin in mid-June, the museum planners had well-founded worries that the need for “sufficient water” in the river could very well mean that the colossal stone head would not arrive in time.

A few more anxious weeks would pass before the museum received a new message from Mexico. Museum officials were informed that an overland route was now deemed the most feasible way to transport the massive head. Although that would involve constructing a 23 mi. (36 km) long road through tropical forests and across river floodplains, the Mexican Marine Ministry agreed to construct the road at their expense. The project would be co-directed by archaeologist Alfonso Medellín and a navy captain.

As it turned out, the road project did not begin until April, only two months before the exhibition was due to open. Filming began then as well. The challenges of constructing a road across the varied tropical landscape were daunting in and of themselves, but Medellín faced a second and equally serious problem. Much of the site of San Lorenzo was the communal property of the village of Tenochtitlán, and the villagers were quite unhappy that yet another monument—the colossal head—was being removed from their land. They demanded that in exchange for the head, a schoolhouse be built in the village. The situation remained tense until Medellín took four village representatives north to the state capital of Xalapa for a meeting with the governor. There, an official document was signed promising the school building.

By May the road being constructed to Tenochtitlán from the outside world had finally reached the village. Only a few miles remained to reach the plateau and site, but rains were already threatening, and the road crew was worried about an early start to the rainy season. Flooding of the lowland areas the new road was crossing would strand not

only the trucks and bulldozers being used in the road construction but also the colossal head. As weather worries grew, village tensions over the planned removal of the head once again erupted. The reason was ironic. Mere days after the new road had finally reached the village of Tenochtitlán, a car arrived in town on that road. Two gunmen emerged from it and stole the Olmec carved stone jaguar from the village's schoolhouse. It was the same carving seen by the Stirlings on their initial trip to the San Lorenzo site. The village was outraged by both the brazen theft and the impending removal of the colossal head.

The road construction eventually reached the site of San Lorenzo, and the day finally arrived when the colossal head would be removed from the ground on the San Lorenzo plateau and placed onto a flatbed semi-trailer truck. However, as that was going on, a large mob of outraged villagers in Tenochtitlán stretched a rope across the new road in protest of the monument's removal. The rope was decorated with small Mexican flags, and the villagers stood at that flimsy barricade, armed with shotguns and machetes, intent on halting the truck and its cargo. Medellín, anticipating trouble, arrived at the scene with an army captain and armed soldiers.

It was a stalemate. Darkness fell. Medellín and the navy captain in charge of the removal project were worried about an approaching rainstorm that could flood the road. They urged the truck to continue. The filmmakers, however, wanted to wait until the next morning's sunlight so they could film the truck passing through the village of Tenochtitlán, and their decision prevailed. The semi-trailer parked for the night, and the protesters returned to their homes. The next morning the truck carrying Head 2 passed through the village unmolested. A few weeks later the colossal head arrived in Houston by sea. Following Houston's Olmec exhibition, the head was returned to Mexico and today is on exhibit at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

The removal of monuments from archaeological sites to museums is still quite common. In many instances removal is conducted to protect the monuments from damage (e.g., the petroleum activities at La Venta) or erosion, or from theft by looters. The removal of San Lorenzo Head 2 was done for an exhibition in the U.S. and sanctioned by the upper levels of the Mexican government. In other cases removals have been carried out to increase a state governor's prestige by adding to the Olmec collection of the state's museum. But whatever factors underlie a removal, it almost always creates tensions among the people in the region from which the monuments are taken. The social im-

pact and ethics of monument removal are serious questions in the field of Mesoamerican archaeology today, and those topics will reappear several times in this book.

Although the saga of the removal of Head 2 from San Lorenzo in 1963 may seem merely an interesting anecdote in the history of Olmec archaeology, the problems it caused would ultimately jeopardize the start of what would become the most significant Olmec archaeological research project of the 1960s, the excavations directed at San Lorenzo by Michael Coe and Richard Diehl (chapter 9).

The “Idol” on the Volcano

Several years after helping direct the removal of Head 2 from San Lorenzo, Alfonso Medellín initiated another removal project. That venture would be vastly more difficult, not only because he would not have the luxury of bulldozers, trucks, and navy engineers, but also because of the monument’s location. Medellín decided that the statue seen by Blom and La Farge on the summit of the San Martín Pajapan volcano should be transferred to the anthropology museum in the state capital, Xalapa, for restoration, safekeeping, and display (fig. 8.2). The social impact of this removal project would be different from what happened at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, and not as immediately obvious.

While the positioning of the San Martín Pajapan statue suggests that the Olmecs held that mountain in special veneration, there is good reason to believe that over the centuries, the volcano and its statue continued to be revered by indigenous societies of that region. As Medellín wrote, “The indigenous Popoluca and Nahuas, inhabitants of the Tuxtla mountains, and above all, those closest to the Cerro de San Martín, always knew of the existence of a pre-Hispanic sculpture there, which they called variously with the name Chane, ‘el chaneque’ or our ‘Father San Martín.’” He also noted that the indigenous peoples revered both the statue and the mountain, and respected and feared the powers represented by the ancient statue. Their reverence was often expressed by the pilgrimages they undertook to the volcano’s summit to leave offerings. Although those pilgrimages had created tunnel-like paths through the dense tropical forest to the mountain’s crest, the trails were often treacherous and narrow, with dangerous drop-offs. The removal of the monument from the volcano would be a difficult undertaking. The summit of the San Martín volcano, at c. 4100 ft. (1250 m) above sea level, ac-



Fig. 8.2. San Martín Pajapan statue. Museum of Anthropology, Xalapa. Photo by the author.

tually consists of two peaks separated by a small saddle that is approximately the length of a football field (c. 100 yds./100 m). When Medellín and his research team made their initial ascent of the volcano to view the statue, they found that it was situated within that saddle area. It was sitting atop a rectangular platform that contained numerous fragments of pre-Hispanic pottery, as well as heavy accumulations of candle wax and other objects from more recent offerings. The carving was not in

good condition. As Blom and La Farge had seen four decades earlier, the arms and legs were missing, a circumstance they blamed on Ismael Loya (see chapter 2).

The fact that the San Martín Pajapan statue sat atop a rectangular platform is a significant piece of information; data on positioning and mode of display is available for very few of the 200-plus Olmec monuments known today. The platform on the summit was therefore of great interest to Medellín, and he excavated a test pit into it to a depth of 53 in. (135 cm). The pit revealed an abundance of broken pottery and a few jade beads, but the pottery sherds were a mix that covered a time span of nearly three thousand years, from the Olmec period to recent times. However, within the platform's upper levels the excavations made a significant discovery: the missing arms, legs, and "bar" from the stone sculpture!

Unfortunately, as is often the case in archaeological research, the data obtained from the platform excavations present as many questions as answers. The platform's great quantity and diversity of ceramics unquestionably represent the remnants of countless offerings and indicate that the location had been an important shrine for many centuries. However, Medellín's brief publication does not describe the platform's construction or size, and it is impossible to ascertain the platform's antiquity from the test pit data. The platform had probably been repaired and rebuilt by pilgrims on numerous occasions over its lifespan. What remains unknown is whether it was originally an Olmec construction or was erected by later peoples who continued to venerate the statue. Although Olmec period pot sherds occur in the lower levels of the excavation, so do sherds dating to AD 800. Furthermore, the discovery of the missing statue pieces within the platform's upper levels, in association with a mix of ancient and recent artifacts, indicates that those upper levels pertain to the twentieth century.

Another question that remains is, what role did Loya play in the statue's positioning? Blom and La Farge inform us that several decades earlier, Loya had moved the monument from its "original location." Had the engineer moved the monument only slightly, or had he brought the statue to the platform area from some other nearby location? Alternatively, did pilgrims discover that the idol had been moved by Loya and return it themselves to its original position? We don't know. We can only affirm from the data that this locale had been an extremely sacred area for millennia and the location of countless pilgrimages. The pilgrims had climbed to the summit of this sacred mountain to pay hom-

age to the mountain and also to the supernatural forces believed to be embodied in the Olmec statue.

Removing the Statue

While the platform was being excavated, Medellín and his crew began preparations for the removal of the monument. Merely hiking along the narrow and steep foot trail to the summit had been difficult for the project members. The task of moving the cumbersome 1.3-ton (1180 kg) stone carving along that route, undamaged, would be an extraordinary effort. On the other hand, it would perhaps be an effort that in some small way mirrored the great labor that the Olmecs had expended three millennia earlier in bringing the statue to the top of the sacred mountain.

As the great stone carving was carefully encased in a strong wooden crate, workers began cutting a 5.5 mi. (9 km) path through the forest to provide access for a four-wheel-drive vehicle. The latter work meant cutting down trees, moving boulders and other obstacles out of the way, creating fords, and making wooden bridges to cross numerous streambeds. However, there were several areas near the summit where tall escarpments made road access impossible. Those impediments meant that Medellín and his assistants would first have to move the crated monument down the mountain to the newly created vehicle path, somehow negotiating the cliffs of the same tall escarpments that thwarted the roadway's further progress.

Preparations were finally completed, and through the use of log rollers and "wooden tracks," the crated monument began its slow and laborious journey, inch by inch, down from the summit. When the crated carving reached the escarpments, the archaeologists turned to a clever but somewhat risky solution. They stretched steel cables across the abysses and improvised a rustic "cable car" to move the statue past those obstacles. Remarkably, their efforts were a success and the San Martín Pajapan statue soon reached the University of Veracruz in Xalapa. There it was carefully restored, and today it is one of the many major Olmec stone monuments exhibited in the magnificent Museum of Anthropology.

Nevertheless, a question lingers in my mind. For countless centuries the peoples living near the San Martín Pajapan volcano held the mountain and the statue in reverence. That is true of the villagers who

guided Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge to the summit to view the stone monument, of the villagers who assisted Medellín's efforts, and of the many pilgrims who visited the summit of the volcano. How did they feel about the removal of "Chane"/"Our Father San Martín" from the sacred mountain?

CHAPTER 9

Adding Antiquity to the Olmecs (1966–1968)

Stirling and Drucker's 1946 excavations at San Lorenzo and Medellín's 1960 explorations at Laguna de los Cerros were never fully published. Thus, even into the mid-1960s interpretations about the Olmecs and their world continued to rely almost exclusively on the data gathered in 1942–1943 and 1955 at one small area of La Venta, Complex A. Furthermore, while the 1955 Complex A radiocarbon dates had finally demonstrated the general antiquity of the Olmecs (chapter 7), those few dates did not place either the Olmecs or La Venta more specifically or securely in time—they dated only Complex A. In addition, the Complex A research did not provide any information on the lifeways or subsistence practices of the Olmecs, or insights into their origins. There were no earlier stratigraphic levels showing a development in artifacts and architecture leading up to what was found in Complex A. Fortunately, many of the questions left unresolved by the La Venta archaeological data would begin to be answered by the comprehensive and multifaceted three-year Río Chiquito Project, begun in 1966 by Michael Coe to investigate the site of San Lorenzo.

Matthew Stirling has been correctly credited by Michael Coe as the founding father of Olmec archaeology. However, Coe himself deserves enormous credit for reenergizing the search and carrying Olmec archaeology to the new level of scholarship that the field has witnessed in the past several decades (fig. 9.1). Coe's career in Mesoamerican archaeology began on the Pacific coast of Guatemala in the late 1950s, and he made significant contributions to our understanding of Preclassic period developments in that region. Nevertheless, his real love was the Gulf coast Olmecs. He therefore began serious planning for a project at San Lorenzo, for he perceived that site to have played a major role in Olmec prehistory. Time has since proven him correct.

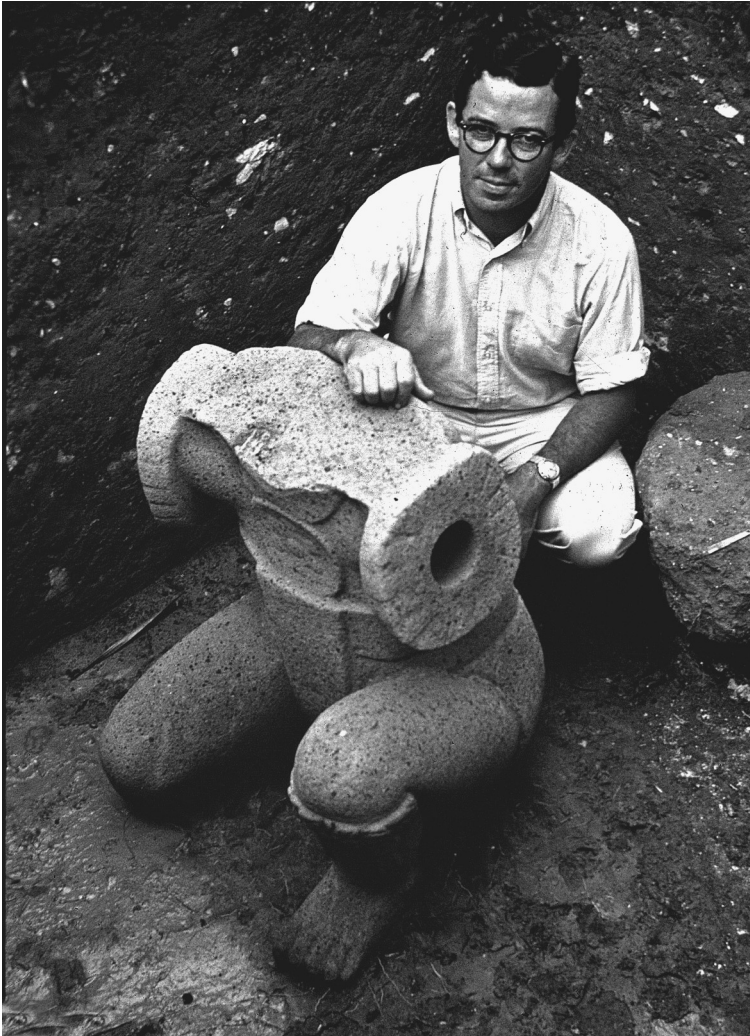


Fig. 9.1. Michael Coe and newly excavated Monument 34, 1967. The half-kneeling figure, decapitated, apparently had moveable arms. Photo courtesy of Michael D. Coe.

In December of 1964, Coe traveled to southern Veracruz with the intention of making a preliminary visit to San Lorenzo, for he had never seen the site. The rainy season was just ending, and the dirt road constructed for the removal of Head 2 was impassable because floodwaters still covered it in places. Therefore, to reach his destination Coe relied upon the age-old yet standard means of long-distance travel in this land

of the ancient Olmecs—by boat along the rivers. In this instance, it was by outboard motorboat on a trip originating far downriver in the city of Minatitlán.

He arrived safely in the village of Tenochtitlán, but his plans to visit the site of San Lorenzo were quickly thwarted. In the aftermath of the village unrest that had arisen the previous year when Colossal Head 2 was removed, soldiers had been garrisoned in the village to keep the peace. They refused to let Coe continue the few short miles to the San Lorenzo plateau. It was not until the following year, after the garrison had been removed, that he was able to reach San Lorenzo and begin making plans to excavate there.

Coe's Río Chiquito Project would be broad in scope. It would focus on San Lorenzo but also include excavations at the sites of Tenochtitlán and Potrero Nuevo, at the base of the plateau. It would seek data on the Olmecs' lifeways, but would also conduct a detailed study of the region's human ecology—the relationship between humans, their subsistence practices, and the tropical environment. The goal of the ecological research was to understand how the Olmecs could have developed and thrived in a tropical ecosystem that some scholarly skeptics had deemed unsuitable for the rise of such a complex society.

Archaeologist Richard Diehl joined the project as assistant director, and Mexican archaeologists Francisco ("Paco") Beverido and Ramón Arellanos also participated. In addition, retired engineer Ray Krotser signed on as a volunteer; in his capacity as project cartographer, though, he wound up being a very significant contributor to the project's success.

Initiating archaeological fieldwork is far more complicated than is usually represented in movies and television, where the archaeologist-hero selects a site, travels there, and simply begins digging. In reality, preparations begin a year or more before the actual fieldwork. Grant proposals must be written that seek funding for the research; similar proposals requesting excavation permits must be submitted to the host country; and plans must be made for the day-to-day necessities that will be required in the field, such as housing, food, transportation, workers, equipment, mapping, artifact storage, banking, and so on. Perhaps not surprisingly, there are also often unanticipated pitfalls along each step of the way.

Michael Coe and his team arrived at the village of Tenochtitlán in January 1966. They had successfully obtained National Science Foundation funding for the project, and they carried the requisite research permits from Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History

(INAH) and the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa, Veracruz, as well as a letter of support from the governor of Veracruz. However, in spite of those documents several hurdles still faced them, including the fact that no fieldwork could be carried out without the final and most crucial permission—the consent of the villagers of Tenochtitlán—for, as mentioned in chapters 6 and 8, the site of San Lorenzo is located on their communal land. The fate of the Río Chiquito Project essentially rested in the hands of the villagers, and they were still highly resentful over the events surrounding the removal of Head 2 only three years earlier. Coe met with the villagers and explained the goals of his research, and their permission was eventually obtained when he promised that any stone monuments discovered by the project would not be removed from the site without their consent.

Much of the first field season of the Río Chiquito Project had to be dedicated to laying the necessary foundations for the total three-year project, including the construction of a camp to house the archaeologists. Stirling and Drucker had established their 1946 field camp on the plateau, at the site itself, but Coe opted to build his project's encampment at the southern edge of the village of Tenochtitlán. The village lies on the banks of the Río Chiquito, and because project provisions and supplies would often have to be brought by boat from Minatitlán, proximity to the river was an important consideration in the placement of the encampment. The town provided land, and workers hired locally began constructing the encampment—a group of thatched huts typical of the region. Some huts served as housing for the archaeologists while others were used for a kitchen, a dining facility, and a lab building. A well was dug to provide water for the camp, and at some distance away, a bathroom hut was constructed. It was equipped with the first and only flush toilet in the region—although flushing it required bringing buckets of water from the well.

In spite of the work carried out at San Lorenzo in 1946 by Stirling and Drucker, the site remained largely unexplored archaeologically. Therefore, the Río Chiquito Project's research efforts that first field season were primarily devoted to carrying out an initial reconnaissance of the plateau-top site. The work also included laying out a baseline on the plateau in preparation for the herculean task of creating an accurate topographic map of the site. Those basic tasks were made difficult by the site's heavy tropical vegetation cover, but the archaeologists' efforts were rewarded at times when, during their labors, they would come upon a previously unreported Olmec stone monument.

On their 1945 visit to Tenochtitlán the Stirlings had observed that the village of Tenochtitlán was built atop an archaeological site (chapter 6). As the 1966 construction of the Río Chiquito Project's camp progressed, artifacts and potsherds were continually being unearthed. Stimulated by those finds, the project initiated formal excavations within the encampment during that first season. However, most of the artifacts recovered by that work pertained to a late time period in the area's prehistory (c. AD 900), a period that Coe and Diehl named the Villa Alta phase.

Full-scale research at the site of San Lorenzo began the following year, the 1967 field season. The plateau was an immense area to investigate, and the researchers had many burning questions about the Olmecs to try to begin to resolve. They said of their work, "We were constantly torn between two conflicting desires: (1) to excavate a great number of places and collect as much information as possible on a great variety of topics or (2) to make certain that as many excavations as possible reached culturally sterile subsoil. In general we tended toward the second strategy." However, Coe and Diehl also noted that because sterile subsoil frequently lay far below the surface, they had to expend a great deal of the project's resources and time to follow that strategy.

The strategy ultimately paid important dividends. As various areas of the plateau were probed and tested, the excavation units began penetrating down into stratigraphic levels containing ceramics and artifacts that were undeniably Olmec, yet were different and older than anything that had been uncovered at La Venta. The Río Chiquito Project was revealing for the first time a significant but poorly documented earlier period of Olmec prehistory. The investigations were literally doubling the known time span of the Olmecs! But as exciting and significant as those finds were, further surprises awaited the excavators. As their excavations continued downward toward sterile subsoil, they penetrated beyond the base of those earlier Olmec levels and continued to encounter strata with cultural remains. The long-sought evidence of "pre-Olmec" peoples began coming to light. The Río Chiquito Project's discoveries electrified the world of Olmec scholarship.

Based upon their analysis of the stratified levels of occupation and the changes in pottery types over time, Coe and Diehl defined and named six phases spanning the site's pre-Olmec and Olmec occupations. Through the use of radiocarbon dating they placed the phases in time. The earliest evidence of human settlement on the San Lorenzo plateau, the Ojochi phase (1500/1450–1350 BC), had consisted of per-

haps two small hamlets occupied by slash-and-burn farmers. In the subsequent Bajío phase (1350–1250 BC) the population increased, more of the plateau was inhabited, and some plateau areas appear to have been leveled and enlarged with fill dirt. In the subsequent Chicharras phase (1250–1150 BC) the population and site area continued to expand, and according to the researchers, some of the pottery and figurines begin to look Olmec-like. The San Lorenzo phase (1150–900 BC) is said to represent the “apogee” of the Olmecs at San Lorenzo. A very distinctive ceramic type with deeply incised iconographic motifs—“carved” pottery—is present at that time, as are clay baby-face figurines. The majority of the site’s magnificent stone monuments date to the San Lorenzo phase as well. Significantly, the Ojochi, Bajío, and Chicharras phases provide the evidence missing from the work at La Venta’s Complex A, namely a stratigraphic sequence leading from pre-Olmecs into Olmecs.

The Olmecs, like all other known societies, evolved and changed over the years. Sometime around 900 BC the “carved pottery” and figurines characteristic of the San Lorenzo phase declined, and new pottery styles became prominent. To reflect these cultural changes, two additional phases were designated: Nacaste (900–700 BC) and, following an apparent hiatus in occupation, Palangana (600–400 BC). Importantly, the ceramics of the Palangana phase have close similarities to the Olmec pottery recovered during the excavations at La Venta’s Complex A.

As the excavations were being carried out, Ray Krotser was involved in the task of creating a topographic map of the San Lorenzo plateau. In my mind he was a miracle worker because the detailed map that he produced was made under terrible conditions and with very basic and unsophisticated equipment—a plane table and a telescopic alidade (fig. 9.2). Although the surface of the San Lorenzo plateau is relatively flat, that vast expanse is cut by deep *barrancas*. Furthermore, it was covered in many areas by heavy tropical vegetation that not only obscured the visibility vital to mapping but also concealed cultural features such as very low mounds that may have served as the foundations for houses.

To make the mapping work possible, much of the plateau needed to be cleared. The project was forced to dip into its excavation funds to hire laborers to cut and burn the vegetation, creating another unanticipated expenditure in time, labor, and research dollars. Nevertheless, like the added expenses of digging deep stratigraphic pits, it turned out to be a profitable investment that was highly justified by the excellent results obtained.

The clearing and mapping of the plateau surface had another bene-



Fig. 9.2. Ray Krotser mapping at San Lorenzo with an alidade and plane table. In spite of the site's size and tropical vegetation, he created a very detailed topographic map of the San Lorenzo plateau. Photo courtesy of Michael D. Coe.

fit, for it revealed over two hundred very low mounds. Were those indeed house mounds, indicating substantial residential areas? Also exposed were a number of large shallow depressions that collected water during the rainy season. Called lagoons (*lagunas*) by the local farmers, they were being used at that time as watering holes for the cattle being pastured on the plateau. Intrigued by the lagoons, the project excavated a trench into one and discovered that the lagoon's base had apparently been lined with blocks of bentonite clay. This is a technique used even today in the U.S. to make the base of constructed ponds impermeable to water. Because several springs on the plateau could have provided good drinking water for the Olmecs living there, the man-made lagoons were hypothesized to have been an important functional component of the Olmec landscape at San Lorenzo.

The ongoing excavations soon yielded an exciting discovery at the western edge of the site. Years earlier, Matt Stirling had seen "several dozen trough shaped pieces of basalt" there, and he suspected that they might once have been part of a covered aqueduct. Río Chiquito Project excavations in the same approximate area uncovered still-intact sections of a lengthy buried aqueduct over 550 ft. (168 m) long (fig. 9.3).



Fig. 9.3. A section of the stone aqueduct system unearthed by Michael Coe's Río Chiquito Project at San Lorenzo. Note the secondary system joining the main system. Photo courtesy of Michael D. Coe.



Fig. 9.4a. Monument 52, San Lorenzo. A U-shaped aqueduct stone carved on its exterior with the image of a snarling “were-jaguar” supernatural. National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City. Photo by the author.



Fig. 9.4b. Monument 52, San Lorenzo. The back side of the carving, showing that it is an aqueduct stone. National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City. Photo by the author.

Significantly, the aqueduct included three intersections where secondary systems joined that “main line.” The discovery of the ancient Olmec aqueduct was a spectacular find. Furthermore, the proximity of the aqueduct system to one of the plateau’s major lagoons suggested to the archaeologists that the aqueducts might have been linked to the lagoons, perhaps as drains.

As mentioned in chapter 6, during their one-day visit to San Lorenzo in 1945, Matt and Marion Stirling had been shown a large stone basin in the form of a swimming duck (Mon. 9) that had apparently served as a receptacle of water at the endpoint of an aqueduct line. If the duck basin had been positioned at the outlet of an aqueduct, might a carving also have been situated at an aqueduct system’s inlet? That question was answered with the discovery of Monument 52, an elaborately carved aqueduct trough stone. The 35 in. (90 cm) long carving had apparently lain “at the head of the main drain line.” It depicts a seated snarling Olmec

“were-jaguar” supernatural being with a cleft head and serrated ear covers (fig. 9.4a). However, what is particularly significant is that the supernatural image decorates the exterior base of a U-shaped aqueduct stone (fig. 9.4b). It was an image never meant for viewing because it would have been buried face-down as part of the aqueduct.

During its three-year span the Río Chiquito Project recorded thirty-five Olmec stone monuments (Mon. 18–52). Mineralogical studies show that nearly all of them were carved from basalt brought from the Tuxtla Mountains. What remained unknown was whether they were carved at San Lorenzo or elsewhere. Coe and Diehl noted that no evidence of monument workshop activities was found during the project’s excavations, although a workshop for manufacturing basalt *metates* and *manos* (for grinding maize?) was uncovered.

The *metate* “workshop,” the Monument 52 aqueduct stone, and several other stone carvings were discovered during the Río Chiquito Project’s final field season through the use of a cesium magnetometer, an instrument that can locate subsurface stones and similar buried features. The project ended in 1968, but its successful use of the magnetometer stimulated INAH archaeologists to continue magnetometer surveys and limited excavations at San Lorenzo for two more years. That research led to the discovery of Colossal Heads 7 and 8 and eleven other stone carvings (Mon. 53–65).

In addition to the archaeological research, the Río Chiquito Project’s associated study of the area’s human ecology included aerial photography to collect basic environmental data and extensive ground studies by soil specialists and botanists. The resulting information on land use patterns, soil productivity, and carrying capacity (an estimate of how many people could have been supported by the local environmental resources) has proven to be valuable evidence for understanding how the Olmec center of San Lorenzo and its people were able to thrive in a natural setting many once thought undesirable. The comprehensive data retrieved by Coe, Diehl, and their colleagues during the Río Chiquito Project carried Olmec studies far beyond what had been learned at La Venta’s Complex A and provided a much richer vision of the Olmecs. The project’s findings also became the foundation for the next generation of thinking about the Olmecs.

CHAPTER 10

Research Headaches at La Venta (1967–1969)

A Quest for More Radiocarbon Samples: 1967

The Río Chiquito Project's excavations and radiocarbon dates placed the “beginnings” of the Olmecs several centuries further back in time than had previously been imagined. That fact seems to have prompted University of California–Berkeley archaeologist Robert Heizer to have the remaining portions of the original 1955 La Venta radiocarbon samples reanalyzed in 1967, together with two additional samples. The accuracy of radiocarbon dating had greatly improved since the first La Venta radiocarbon samples had been submitted, as shown in the new results. Heizer's 1967 analyses moved the dates for La Venta's Complex A another two hundred years back in time, to 1000–600 BC.

Armed with the knowledge of the revised dates, Heizer, Phil Drucker, and Heizer's UC-Berkeley colleague John Graham traveled to La Venta in the summer of 1967. Their plan was to carry out some small-scale excavations in Complex A in order to obtain additional charcoal samples for dating. The changes at the site during the dozen years since their previous research there had been profound. The oil exploration activities that had been peripheral to the site in the 1940s and 1950s now directly impacted La Venta. Not only had the construction of the Pemex airstrip destroyed the northwest corner of Complex A (see chapter 7), but now a large pipeline from the nearby Pemex petrochemical facility ran across the site. Furthermore, the modern town of Villa La Venta was steadily expanding and encroaching into the very heart of the site, the area surrounding La Venta's great earthen pyramid (fig. 10.1).

Villa La Venta had also become a relatively wild and lawless oil boomtown, with all of the vices and corruption common to such a set-



Fig. 10.1. La Venta in 1968. Aerial view looking northeast, showing the encroachment of houses and industry into a large area of the site south of the pyramid. A small section of the airstrip that damaged Complex A, northwest of the pyramid, is just visible in the upper left corner of the picture. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, ID number heizer_0809.

ting. The archaeologists were not greeted as returning friends but instead were viewed with suspicion and hostility by the local authorities and the area's new population. The archaeologists presented the appropriate Mexican government research permits to the town's authorities, but when they attempted to begin their research, Heizer and his wife, Phil Drucker, and a Mexican colleague were arrested and detained for a short time by those same authorities while "the validity of their research permit was verified."

In spite of these problems, the archaeologists were ultimately able to excavate some new pits in Complex A, focusing especially on Mound A-2, whose lower levels were relatively intact even though the upper portions had been destroyed since 1955. From that work they obtained thirty-two additional charcoal samples. In the end, however, only six samples were significant enough to be submitted for radiocarbon dating. Unfortunately, when the results came in from the analysis, only one date (600 BC) was regarded by the researchers as "acceptable."

Although their attempt to obtain a suite of new radiocarbon dates for

Complex A would prove unsuccessful, their research time at La Venta was not wasted. Heizer, Graham, and Drucker were able to also briefly turn their attention to La Venta's tall earthen pyramid mound. At the time of the 1955 research the pyramid was densely covered by tropical vegetation, and its form was difficult to discern. It seemed to have the rectangular shape so common to later-period Mexican pyramids, and thus it was published as a rectangle in *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955*. In 1967, however, the pyramid was no longer completely covered by vegetation, and its actual form was more readily observable. Heizer, Graham, and Drucker were surprised by what they saw. The great mound did not seem to be rectangular, but rather circular in its basal circumference. Its side surfaces were cut at intervals by vertical erosion gulleys. To them it resembled a "fluted cone." They wondered if the pyramid mound had been constructed by the Olmecs to replicate the form of a cinder cone volcano, a common phenomenon in the Tuxtepec Mountains to the north.

Investigating the Pyramid: 1968

Excited by their new insights into the pyramid's shape, Heizer and Graham returned to La Venta at the beginning of 1968. Their intent was to make a careful topographic map of the great mound and to carry out some limited excavations. This time they brought six graduate students with them to assist in the research. Once again, in accordance with Mexican laws regarding archaeological research, the pair presented their absolutely valid and legal Mexican government research permits to the local authorities. This time, to their shock, the authorities flatly denied them permission to carry out any of their planned investigations! The "mayor" of Villa La Venta asserted not only that he did not have the authority to permit their work, but also that he believed all of the signatures on their archaeological permits were forgeries. Furthermore, he threatened the archaeologists with arrest if they attempted to carry out excavations. Heizer and Graham appealed to Mexican federal and state officials for help. Although their confrontations with the local authorities eased momentarily, the overall harassment did not. In fact, the 1968 field season turned out to be a hellish six-week experience for all of the project members.

The village mayor assigned local people to keep an eye on the archaeologists and their activities. Rumors began circulating by word of mouth

and in the local newspapers that the researchers were stealing gold and treasures. During the day, when the excavators attempted to conduct their investigations, they were the targets of bottles and rocks thrown at them. At night, vandals would remove the survey marker stakes and “treasure hunt” in the pits the archaeologists were excavating. Yet in spite of the continued torments, the archaeologists successfully mapped the great mound and confirmed that the structure was indeed generally circular in shape. The mapping also defined more accurately the earthen platform upon which the pyramid had been constructed.

From their 1940s research Stirling and Drucker had published the mound’s height as 106 ft. (32.9 m), based on a measurement given to them by a Pemex surveyor, while the 1955 researchers calculated it at 103 ft. (32.3 m). The 1968 remapping could not confirm either of those measurements, because at some time between 1955 and 1968 Pemex had used a bulldozer to remove 3 to 6 ft. (1 or 2 m) from the top of the mound! Nevertheless, their new mapping showed that the mound’s base covered approximately 3 acres (14,520 sq. yds./12,873 sq m), and the pyramid’s volume was an estimated 3,500,000 cu. ft. (99,109 cu m) of earth and clay.

La Venta on a Larger Scale

The decades of archaeological emphasis on Complex A meant that little mapping or exploration had been carried out in any other area of the La Venta site. Today we know that Complex A comprises less than 1 percent of the total site area, meaning that 99 percent of the site was underexplored, including areas with mound architecture and stone monuments. One such area was Complex B, the immense platform mound–plaza area immediately south of the pyramid (fig. 10.2), where Blom and La Farge had recorded altar-thrones, stelae, and a colossal Olmec stone head (chapter 2). Although Phil Drucker had excavated several of his test pits in that general area in 1942, and Mexican archaeologists likewise had briefly excavated somewhere there in 1958 (their brief published comments contain no map and few data), this central site area remained relatively unknown. To their credit, Heizer and Graham rectified that situation somewhat. They began mapping the Complex B mounds and plaza, and they assigned their project’s graduate students the task of excavating test pits in Complex B for the purpose of obtaining data on its history and ceramic stratigraphy.

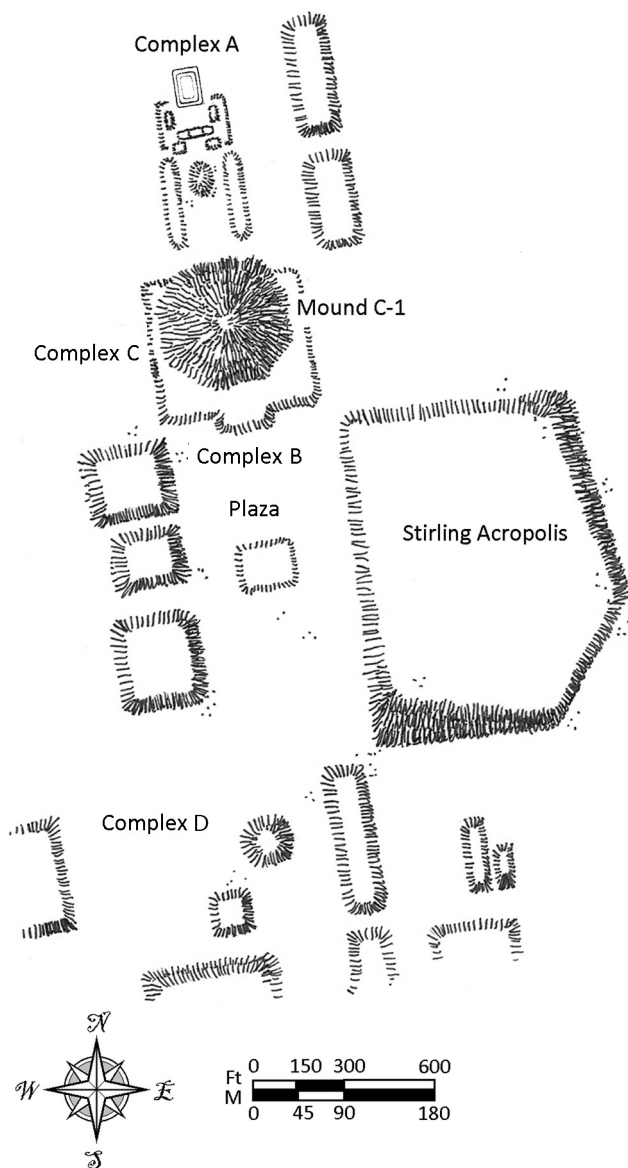


Fig. 10.2. Map of Complex A, Complex B, the pyramid (Mound C-1), and the Stirling Acropolis at La Venta. Scale is approximate. Drawing by Michael Volk.

However, by then the town of Villa La Venta was sprawled over the site area with a mix of residences and businesses of many types. That situation obviously hampered both the mapping and excavation work, and thus the project's excavations had to be carried out in areas accessible to the archaeologists, such as vacant lots. A notation in one field journal perhaps sums up the nature of the situation best: "Student _____ has started another ceramic test pit on a low mound just east of the whore house area to the south of the pyramid."

As the archaeologists carried out their research, they were aware that a large "elevated area" occurred on the east side of the Complex B plaza. They also knew that Stirling had seen some basalt columns in that area during his initial visit to La Venta. However, even in 1968 dense tropical forest vegetation still effectively concealed that "elevated area," making its size and form difficult to ascertain. Fortunately, near the end of the field season, Pemex gave the project directors a helicopter flight over the site so that they could photograph the pyramid from the air. From that elevation they could also see, for the first time, the enormous expanse of the elevated area. It was a flat-topped earthen platform nearly 1100 ft. (335 m) long, with an upper surface area of over 20 acres (8 ha). Rising about 20 ft. (6 m) above the Complex B plaza area, it delimits the plaza's entire east edge. Heizer and Graham named this large raised area the "Stirling Acropolis" in honor of Matthew Stirling.

Although the 1968 field season was drawing to a close, Heizer and Graham and their graduate student assistants had their workmen begin clearing the dense vegetation from a portion of the upper surface of the Acropolis. That work disclosed several mound constructions. However, a cap of wind-blown drift sand covered the upper surface of the Acropolis to a depth of 3 or 4 ft. (90 to 120 cm), thus concealing the Olmec period surface of the Acropolis and any possible small Olmec period surface features. Heizer and Graham wished to test-pit this area, but did not want to waste time and resources by simply excavating blindly. Their solution was to have some iron probing rods made. The long rods could be pushed down through the drift sand and into the platform mound itself. Their strategy quickly paid off when the probes began to hit buried stone in several areas. Those localities were marked with wooden stakes, and as Heizer and Graham stated, "After a day [of probing] we were working in a maze of stakes."

Although the project leaders had been warned by the village authorities not to excavate, the potential of the Acropolis area they were testing was so great that they decided to take the risk and dig away the drift

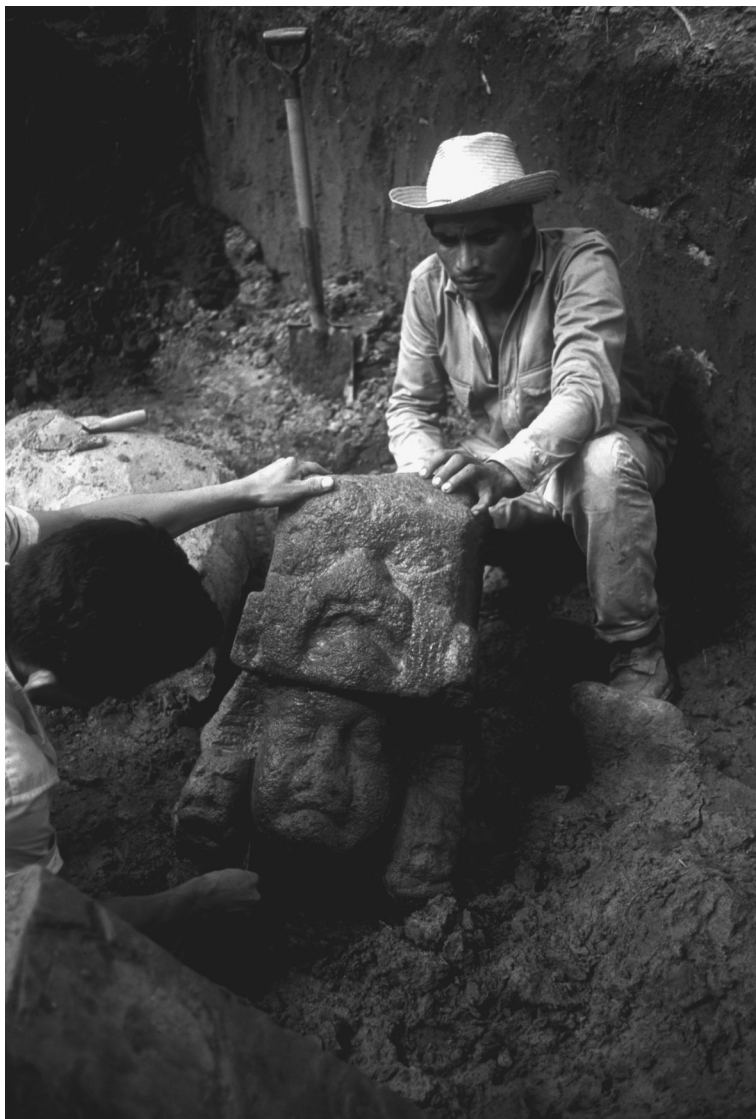


Fig. 10.3. La Venta Monument 44, a statue head nearly identical to that of the San Martín Pajapan monument. Uncovered during 1968 excavations on the Stirling Acropolis. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, ID number heizer_0616.



Fig. 10.4. Section of a stone aqueduct system discovered by 1968 excavations on the Stirling Acropolis. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, ID number heizer_0625.

sand from one heavily staked area. That work soon uncovered four stone monument fragments, one of which was a large stone statue head with features identical to those of the San Martín Pajapan statue (fig. 10.3). Their euphoria over the new finds was short-lived, however, for news traveled quickly. Within an hour the mayor and a group of about thirty “officials” from the village arrived on the scene and demanded the monuments. Heizer and Graham had the legal authority from the Mexican government to conduct the research and the monuments were therefore their responsibility. They rejected the demand and a stand-off ensued. The mayor and his large entourage were all “armed with .45 automatics,” however, and in the end, the force of arms prevailed. The monument fragments were hauled down to the municipal building in the village. Perhaps the one bit of consolation to that event was that the archaeologists were not jailed.

Although many investigators would have thrown in the towel at that point, Heizer and Graham did not. Instead, they returned to the Acropolis area and decided to “risk everything, and dig to determine the na-

ture of other stones which had been encountered by the . . . probes.” Their gamble once again paid off with a surprising find—segments of four separate stone aqueduct systems similar in construction to those uncovered by Coe and Diehl at San Lorenzo (fig. 10.4). The longest uncovered by the excavations had a length of c. 26 ft. (8 m) and consisted of sixteen trough stones (and cap stones). Fortunately, the discovery of the U-shaped aqueduct stones did not excite the village mayor or his armed entourage, and the archaeologists were not molested over their newest discovery.

Regrettably, the harassment suffered during the 1968 fieldwork ultimately did take a toll. The mapping of Complex B went unfinished and many of the project’s stratigraphic test pits had to be abandoned before completion. Nevertheless, the field season’s contributions included an accurate map of the site’s pyramid as well as the first large-scale map ever produced of La Venta’s complete ceremonial core area: Complexes A, B, and C (the pyramid). Unfortunately, the radiocarbon assays from the field season once again produced ambiguous results.

A Magnetometer Project: 1969

Motivated by the Río Chiquito Project’s 1968 success in locating buried Olmec monuments through the use of a magnetometer, Robert Heizer organized a magnetometer survey for La Venta for 1969, although with a different research focus. Rather than searching for monuments buried in Complex B or the Stirling Acropolis, where monuments were known to occur, the research party dedicated their efforts to a magnetometer scan of La Venta’s pyramid mound. The results were surprising. Although no stone carvings were discovered by the magnetometer, the instrument’s readings indicated a significant magnetic anomaly near the top of the great earthen structure, indicating perhaps a buried stone pavement or a basalt structure within the pyramid. However, Heizer apparently never sought a permit to investigate that anomaly through excavations, and the unusual magnetic anomaly near the summit of the pyramid would remain unexplored for over three more decades (see chapter 18).

Drucker wanted to initiate another season of excavations at La Venta. However, Heizer was distressed by the harassment and problems he had been facing at the site, and he declined to return. Neither he nor Drucker carried out research at La Venta again.

CHAPTER 11

Reclaiming La Venta (1984 to the Present)

By the early 1980s the modern settlement of Villa La Venta had a population of seventeen thousand. Its streets and houses not only covered La Venta's Complex B but also were encroaching on the pyramid and Complex A. The site's future seemed bleak. However, the situation began to change for the better in 1984 with the advent of a modest research project carried out by Mexican archaeologist Rebecca González, who at that time was studying for her PhD at the University of California–Berkeley (it was awarded in 1990). She recognized that there were many basic archaeological questions about La Venta that had not been resolved by previous investigations at the site, and she was determined to fill in some of that knowledge gap. One basic task was simply to survey the 95 hectares (235 acres) within the official site boundaries to ascertain what was there in terms of architecture and other archaeological features. As that work progressed she became acutely aware of the destruction to the site caused by industrial activities and urbanization, and of the horrible state of preservation of that major Olmec center. Something needed to be done about that situation quickly.

Rebecca González set in motion a larger and more comprehensive endeavor to protect, restore, and investigate the site, the La Venta Archaeological Project (PALV; Proyecto Arqueológico La Venta; 1985–1988). The project received the aid and support of INAH and the Instituto de Cultura of the state of Tabasco. The basic goals were the protection of the La Venta site, restoration of the site for tourism, and archaeological investigations of the site and its surrounding sustaining area. To begin to reach the goals of protection and restoration it would be necessary to reclaim the central area of the site from the urban and industrial encroachment that engulfed it. It would be an ambitious undertaking. The

town of Villa La Venta was still growing, and approximately 230 families were living in houses constructed in Complex B and adjacent site areas. In view of the problems that Heizer had faced more than a decade earlier, could the site somehow be retrieved peacefully from the inhabitants of that area of Villa La Venta, or would there be yet another angry reaction and confrontation? An olive branch seemed the most practical solution. The PALV, INAH, the Instituto de Cultura, and various other state governmental agencies began working in cooperation with the 230 families, and they were successfully and peacefully resettled elsewhere. The houses and other buildings they relinquished were taken down and the land cleared. The site's central area was officially designated by the Mexican government as an "archaeological zone" and was fenced and placed under the protection and maintenance of INAH.

As the reclamation was going on, the PALV was also carrying out an energetic research program. A new topographic map of the site was created from aerial photographs. It more than doubled the mapped site area to 640 acres (259 hectares). In addition, magnetometer surveys, soil tests, and some excavations were conducted in Complexes A, C, D, and E.

During their 1955 work in Complex A, Drucker and his colleagues had briefly excavated along the southern base of the pyramid and had uncovered two very large, tall stelae: Monuments 25/26 (composed of two fragments earlier given their own catalog numbers) and 27 (fig. 11.1). Made of green schist and greenish gneiss rather than basalt, the two were quite similar, bearing the same bas-relief image: a large frontal supernatural face. The PALV undertook new excavations in that same location and brought to light three more stelae in the area of the 1955 discoveries. Two of the new stelae, Monuments 88 and 89, bear images identical to those of Monuments 25/26 and 27. The third (Stela 5/Mon. 86) depicts a mythological scene involving four personages, one of whom is descending from the sky. Apparently all five stelae had originally been erected in a line along the pyramid's south face looking outward onto the Complex B plaza.

The PALV excavations at the base of the pyramid also exposed portions of the structure's lower slopes, revealing another surprise. The pyramid's facade seems to have risen in a series of small stages, or "steps." In the areas exposed by the excavations, flat limestone slabs lay on the upper surfaces of those stages, where perhaps they served as a facing to retard erosion. That discovery once again called into question the form of La Venta's pyramid. Rebecca González and UC-Berkeley



Fig. 11.1. La Venta Monument 27, one of four stelae bearing identical supernatural facial images that had been erected at the south base of the La Venta pyramid. Drawing by Michael Volk.



Fig. 11.2. Plaza area of Complex B, looking north past a correctly positioned replica of Stela 2 toward the pyramid. Photo by the author.

archaeologist John Graham are now both of the opinion that the pyramid was a rectangular, stepped edifice. Rebecca feels that a central ramp or stairway existed on the pyramid's south side (see also fig. 2.7), while John believes that there might have been stairways on all four sides of the pyramid in the manner of some early Maya pyramids.

Whatever the case, the great earthen mound has suffered the erosive forces of tropical rains and hurricanes for over 2500 years. It has also undergone the depredations of Pemex bulldozers and uncontrolled excavations by looters who apparently believed that the mound contained a buried treasure. Therefore, even if the pyramid is extensively excavated in the future, the question of its original form may be difficult to fully resolve.

In addition to the PALV research in the main site area, a series of affiliated projects on the periphery of the site—La Venta's rural "sustaining" area—yielded exciting results. Researchers discovered c. 1500 BC pre-Olmec settlements on levees along an ancient course of the Río Bari several miles to the north of La Venta. Paleoecological investigations in the area produced evidence of forest clearing and possible corn cultivation by 5000 BC, manioc cultivation by 4600 BC, and domesticated (not wild) sunflower cultivation at c. 2000 BC.

Those discoveries of pre-Olmec “wetland agriculture” on La Venta’s periphery bring to mind an observation about the “island of La Venta” made over fifty years ago by Phil Drucker during his initial research there. At that time the area was relatively undisturbed, and he noted that “a series of long narrow peninsulas run into the swamps on either side” of the island. He included those projecting fingers of land along the west side of the “island” in his basic site map, published in 1952. Were those features that Drucker recognized the remnants of pre-Olmec or Olmec period raised field agriculture along the edges of the swamps? Raised fields are essentially low man-made platforms of soil constructed in shallow bodies of water for use as self-irrigating garden beds. In the light of discoveries of raised-field agriculture elsewhere in Veracruz and in the Maya area, its possible presence at La Venta is an intriguing possibility. Unfortunately, Drucker’s observation probably can no longer be investigated because the west side of the “island” has been heavily impacted by the buildings of the town of Villa La Venta and the large Pemex petrochemical facility.

Through the efforts of the PALV the site of La Venta has regained some of its original form. Many of the mounds that had been destroyed by urbanization, the airstrip, and petroleum activities have now been reconstructed. A large site museum has also been built. Authentic-looking replicas have replaced the monuments that were moved to the Tabasco state capital of Villahermosa five decades ago for their protection (fig. 11.2). Pathways lead from the museum to the carvings, and visitors are now able to view the monuments in the context of the site’s architectural landscape, that is to say, against the backdrop of the great pyramid and the Stirling Acropolis, much as the Olmecs themselves would have seen them.

La Venta has been successfully restored and today is an excellent archaeological park. However, when all is said and done, aside from the site’s monuments and Complex A, we still know very little about this major Olmec center, its people, and its history.

CHAPTER 12

San Lorenzo Yields New Secrets (1990–2012, Part 1)

Michael Coe's Río Chiquito Project was a pioneering effort carried out under difficult conditions, and it made extremely important contributions to our knowledge of the Olmecs, laying a good foundation for future research at the Olmec center of San Lorenzo. However, very few investigations took place at the site in the two decades that followed. Small magnetometer surveys by INAH in 1969 and 1970 led to the discovery of Colossal Heads 7 and 8, and a ninth colossal head was exposed by soil erosion in the early 1980s, but no significant excavations were undertaken.

That changed in 1990 when Ann Cyphers, an American archaeologist on the faculty of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City, initiated a new research project at the site. Her San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project (SLTAP) began with general long-term goals. She hoped to obtain information on the Olmec settlement that had existed atop the San Lorenzo plateau, to learn more about the role the site's magnificent stone carvings had played within that settlement, and to understand San Lorenzo's position—both geographically and socially—within the larger Olmec world. In 1990 the field of Olmec archaeology was just arriving at the point where such topics could be successfully investigated.

The site of San Lorenzo was still relatively remote in 1990, yet it was a far cry from “the old days” when Stirling and Drucker, or even Coe and Diehl, had worked there. The nearby village of Tenochtitlán, where Coe's encampment had been located, had grown considerably over the intervening twenty-year period. It now sported various modern amenities, including electricity and an improved dirt road that connected the village to the outside world for most of the year. Except for the periods of annual regional flooding, the unpaved road provided access for deliv-

ery trucks that supplied Tenochtitlán's numerous small stores with a variety of groceries, soft drinks, and beer.

The authorities and villagers of Tenochtitlán were receptive to Ann Cyphers's idea for a new multi-year project, although as with Coe's investigations, their stipulation was that any monuments discovered were not to be removed from San Lorenzo. That requirement was completely agreeable to Ann, for her hope was that any stone carvings the SLTAP might unearth would provide the stimulus for the creation of a community museum in Tenochtitlán.

The SLTAP archaeologists set up quarters at the encampment established by the Río Chiquito Project two decades earlier. Most of the original huts built for Coe and his colleagues had long since disappeared, but a few buildings added to the camp area by the 1969 and 1970 INAH magnetometer projects remained. Although still rustic, they included a small house to use as the project's lab and an improved kitchen-dining facility. However, tents pitched around the encampment area served as the living quarters for most of the SLTAP project members. Furthermore, everyone still had to rely on the camp's well to provide the numerous buckets of water required daily for cooking and all other basic necessities, such as bathing and flushing the solitary porcelain toilet. Two electric refrigerators in the kitchen facility now kept food fresh and drinks cool for the archaeologists, but the local women hired to prepare meals for the archaeologists still preferred to do the cooking on a traditional raised charcoal hearth (*fógón*). Outside the kitchen there was a visible reminder of the Río Chiquito Project's earlier presence, a grapefruit tree, likely the product of a seed dropped from one of the many grapefruits consumed by members of that project.

A significant improvement for project logistics was a recently constructed dirt road that ran from the village of Tenochtitlán to the San Lorenzo plateau and then eastward to various distant hamlets. For the project members and local workers, the road meant that instead of the long horseback rides that Coe and his colleagues had endured daily to reach the site in the 1960s, on most days the SLTAP participants could depend on the project's truck to transport them and their supplies up to the plateau and back.

Monuments and Monument Contexts

Workers from Tenochtitlán and villages in the surrounding area provided the manual labor for the SLTAP excavations. Only a few of them

had personally participated in the Río Chiquito Project's excavations two decades earlier, yet everyone in the region had heard tales about the colossal stone heads and other monuments that had been found by Coe and his colleagues. Ann Cyphers quickly learned that the local workforce mistakenly believed that the intent of her project was the discovery and excavation of more stone monuments. Of course, locating stone monuments and studying them in their original context was a goal of the SLTAP, but it was certainly not among the project's research priorities that first year. Nonetheless, many of the workers were greatly disappointed when the first field season ended without the discovery of any significant Olmec monuments. The same was true of the second and then the third field seasons as well. The feeling among the workers was that Dr. Cyphers must be a poor archaeologist because she consistently failed to find impressive stone monuments.

Another worker, an old-timer who had also worked on the Río Chiquito Project, had a different explanation: "inadequate equipment." He was certain that Michael Coe's wristwatch had contained a special monument detector that would "beep" whenever Coe walked over a buried carving, and he noticed that Ann Cyphers lacked such a wristwatch. In fact, it took several years before the workers finally comprehended the project's actual research priorities and became excited by the discovery of house floors and features other than stone monuments.

At least sixty-six Olmec monuments had already been recorded at San Lorenzo when the SLTAP began in 1990. Nevertheless, except for the very early observations by Matt Stirling that Tres Zapotes Head 1 and La Venta Altar 4 had rested upon foundations of small stones, archaeologists still knew very little about how those magnificent stone carvings had been displayed by the Olmecs. What had been their original context? Had the carved stones been erected in specific areas of a village, and in some meaningful pattern? Had they been placed alone or in groupings? Had they stood in the open or in roofed enclosures? The SLTAP sought to answer such questions, but obtaining data would not be easy. By 1990 San Lorenzo's nine known colossal heads had already been taken away from the site to museums in Xalapa and Mexico City. The same was true of the 28-ton basalt altar-throne found by Stirling in 1945, Monument 14 (see fig. 6.1). Furthermore, the few records regarding the discovery locations of any monuments were imprecise at best, and dense tropical vegetation had long ago reclaimed those site areas.

The SLTAP was not the first project to seek the original location of certain monuments. The Río Chiquito Project had also done so, and

with moderate success. For example, Coe and Diehl had successfully tracked down the discovery locale of Monument 14 and also found “the extensive excavations and the ramp needed to get the altar-[throne] up onto a flatbed truck” in 1960 when the massive carving was removed from the site. That earlier work enabled the SLTAP to relocate the spot and begin excavations there. Those investigations disclosed that the altar-throne had originally rested upon a red-colored floor in a patio-like enclosure and that behind it there had been a wall of rammed earth faced with a red sand plaster. Ceramic vessels and burnt bird and human infant bones were found lying upon the red floor. The infant bones are intriguing in light of data from the El Manatí site (chapter 13) suggesting that certain ritual practices of the Olmecs involved child sacrifice.

Monument 14’s original location had not been hard for the SLTAP to find, but the same was not true for contextual data on any of the nine colossal stone heads. Half of those colossal heads had been discovered at scattered locations on the slopes and bottoms of deep *barrancas*, definitely not the places where they had been displayed during San Lorenzo’s prime. Instead, the heads had either been pushed into the *barrancas* or had tumbled in after being undercut by erosion over the millennia. Finding exactly where atop the plateau any of the heads had originally stood would be a challenging task, if any evidence remained at all.

Nevertheless, Ann Cyphers realized that it was worth trying. Her crews carried out careful searches along the upper rims of the *barrancas* above where heads had been discovered. That search was supplemented with test pits in some places. Although it was like searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack, they did discover the original location of Colossal Head 5. Excavations of that spot showed that the head had originally stood upon a large prepared floor of white bentonite clay blocks—a type of floor construction also used by the Olmecs in “high-status” areas of San Lorenzo.

A Matter of Credibility

In the fourth year of the project, Ann Cyphers finally proved her mettle with the local workforce with a spectacular discovery. Prospecting one of the plateau’s deep *barrancas*, her project’s magnetometer recorded a major anomaly. Ann’s excavations of the area unearthed one of San Lorenzo’s most pristine and magnificent colossal stone heads, No. 10,



Fig. 12.1. Ann Cyphers stands beside newly excavated Colossal Head 10, "Tiburcio," at San Lorenzo, 1994. Photo courtesy of Ann Cyphers.

nearly 6 ft. (1.8 m) tall and weighing approximately 8 tons (fig. 12.1). The facial features of individual Olmec colossal heads are all unique, distinctive, and portrait-like. The workers participating in the excavation of Head 10 saw a strong resemblance between the stone face and a present-day resident of Tenochtitlán named Tiburcio. They gave that nickname to Head 10. Today the people of Tenochtitlán, who take great pride in that beautiful carving, continue to refer to it as Tiburcio.

The Tiburcio colossal head was removed from the *barranca* with the aid of a crane provided by Pemex and taken to the project's encampment in Tenochtitlán for safekeeping. In spite of the overall elation at

the discovery of Head 10, the old saying “You’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t” is certainly applicable to what soon followed. Although the discovery of Head 10 had finally given Ann stature in the eyes of her workers and the villagers of Tenochtitlán, it had also somehow displeased an influential regional politician.

Soon false rumors about the discovery of Head 10 began circulating in some of the highest political circles in the state capital of Xalapa. A short time later an outraged Veracruz politician traveled to Mexico City to meet with the archaeological authorities of INAH and to lodge a complaint against Ann. He asserted to INAH that when Head 10 was found, a second colossal head was discovered adjacent to it—but Ann Cyphers kept the second head hidden. Then, according to his accusation, after Pemex had removed Head 10 from the *barranca* using a crane and steel cables, Ann and one of her female assistants had secretly returned to the *barranca* in a pickup truck, unearthed the second head, placed it into the pickup truck, and had taken it from the site and sold it!

I hope that the INAH officials quite properly laughed out loud at the gross absurdity of the accusation. What is especially humorous in retrospect is the mental image of the two women lifting an 8-ton head into the back of a half-ton pickup truck and somehow driving it out of a deep *barranca* at San Lorenzo. In any case, INAH immediately dismissed the accusation.

The fact that many colossal heads have been found in or adjacent to *barrancas* raises an interesting question, a kind of chicken-or-egg paradox. Had the *barrancas* existed there in Olmec times, with the great stone portrait heads purposely erected adjacent to them, perhaps for symbolic-religious reasons? There is ample evidence that clefts in the earth had sacred significance to the Olmecs and to many later pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican peoples. Or, alternatively, had those deep *barrancas* begun forming after the massive heads had been erected at particular site areas, perhaps due to erosion somehow stimulated by those Olmec activities? A definitive answer is not at hand, but Ann Cyphers’s research on the Olmecs’ modifications of the San Lorenzo plateau seems to favor the latter explanation.

Aqueducts and Lagoons

Matt and Marion Stirling had found U-shaped aqueduct stones during their first visit to San Lorenzo (chapter 4), and Coe’s Río Chiquito Proj-

ect had discovered and unearthed lengthy and intact sections of aqueduct lines (see fig. 9.3). While some of those aqueduct lines seem to have been fed by water emanating from natural springs on the plateau, the Río Chiquito Project also called attention to the proximity of some of the plateau's lagoon areas to the aqueduct lines. Had the lagoons served a ritual function for the peoples of San Lorenzo, and had some aqueduct lines served as drain systems for the lagoons?

To seek answers to those questions, the SLTAP excavated lagoons and drain lines in several areas of the site. One of those was Lagoon 8, the lagoon nearest to the lengthy aqueduct line uncovered by the Río Chiquito Project. The large altar-throne, Monument 14, had been situated at the northern edge of that lagoon, and Monument 52—the U-shaped aqueduct stone carved with the image of a snarling “were-jaguar” supernatural (see figs. 9.4a, 9.4b)—had been found near both the lagoon and the east end of the aqueduct line. It seemed a logical assumption that the aqueduct line, the Monument 52 aqueduct stone, and Lagoon 8 were somehow related. The SLTAP excavation at Lagoon 8 yielded surprising results. The evidence indicated that Lagoon 8 was not an Olmec period construction at all! Instead it had most likely been created by cattle ranching activities sometime within the last hundred years. In short, the lagoon could not have fed water to the aqueduct line.

Exploring Olmec Lifeways

Archaeology is usually portrayed in movies and on television as a search for pyramids and royal tombs. However, the truth is that much of archaeological research today is directed toward investigating ancient households. Such household excavations provide information on the lifeways of ancient peoples. If an ancient house floor can be found and carefully excavated, in many instances the distribution and patterning of artifacts and other objects or materials discovered on the floor surface can be used to identify areas where cooking and storage, tool manufacturing, sleeping, and other activities of daily life were carried out. In other words, such data can reveal an ethnography of a house's past inhabitants.

Coe and Diehl had found evidence of a few possible Olmec period house floors during their research at San Lorenzo. Nevertheless, when the SLTAP began in 1990, it was still the case that not a single Olmec house had been excavated anywhere in Olman. Ann Cyphers made find-

ing and excavating Olmec houses a top priority. In addition, it was her hope that such research would lead to an understanding of social differences within the Olmec settlement on the San Lorenzo plateau and how those differences were expressed through pottery, jewelry, and other artifacts. Moreover, thanks to the development of new archaeological techniques for the recovery of the remains of plant and animal materials, household excavations would perhaps also provide information on the diet of the Olmecs.

Those admirable aims would not be reached easily. There are two simple reasons for the lack of information on Olmec houses: preservation and detection. The dwellings of indigenous societies in the world's tropical regions were usually constructed of wooden supporting poles, cane walls, and thatched roofs. Those are all organic materials that decompose fairly rapidly. They leave few, if any, surface indications for archaeologists to find centuries later. More enduring clues to the location of ancient houses might be detectable on the ground surface today in the form of concentrations of the broken pottery and stone tools that were discarded long ago as household garbage by a dwelling's past inhabitants. However, at San Lorenzo the modern ground surface was usually obscured by dense tropical grasses and stands of tropical forest. Any surface artifacts were therefore generally undetectable.

Nevertheless, Ann Cyphers was convinced that with patience, careful search techniques, and of course some luck as well, Olmec houses could be found. Her optimism was due in part to the fact that she had received much of her early archaeological training in the midwestern U.S., where prehistoric dwellings had likewise been constructed of perishable materials. One method used there to reveal ancient house remains is careful "shovel scraping" of extensive horizontal excavation areas. That work may reveal evidence of packed earth floors, or of "post molds."

Post molds are traces left in the soil by the supporting posts of an ancient perishable building. If the building was abandoned and its wooden posts rotted in place, a richer organic soil might occur where each post was located, and those can show up in excavations as darker circular stains. Or, if the supporting posts were removed for reuse, the holes left by their removal might have become filled in with a soil of a slightly different color, which again might be detectable by the archaeologists. Around the world, post molds and the patterns that they create have proven to be extremely useful in both detecting ancient buildings and determining their outlines.

While many of the archaeological techniques that Ann Cyphers

would utilize at San Lorenzo had long been common practice in the U.S., at the start of the SLTAP they were new to the Mexican student crew members of her project. Most of the students had learned to excavate at Classic and Postclassic sites in Mexico, where stone or adobe-walled architecture was common and easily detectable, and thus “pick-and-shovel” archaeology was the norm. That training had not prepared them for the far more subtle phenomenon of post molds. Therefore, most of the students were initially skeptical that features such as post molds really did exist and could be detected. They were also doubtful that the slow and tedious shovel-scraping method was the appropriate way to excavate. That first field season was a learning experience for them.

Over the decade of research subsequently carried out by the SLTAP, a number of Olmec houses were found and studied. Those investigations revealed that the houses at San Lorenzo had varied greatly in size, construction materials, and elaboration. Some dwellings were relatively small and simple constructions with cane walls, packed earth floors, and thatched roofs, quite similar to residences still constructed today in rural Mexico and Central America. Houses of that type were most frequently situated on the margins of the San Lorenzo plateau and on terraced hillsides below the plateau. It is presumed that they represent the dwellings of “commoners,” or people of lower social rank. In contrast, houses located in the central portion of the plateau were found to be larger, and often constructed atop raised earthen platforms. Although they too had thatched roofs, their walls were usually constructed using more sophisticated techniques, such as rammed earth or bentonite (white clay) blocks set in a clay mortar. Those were apparently residences of “elite” members of the society.

In the west-central portion of the plateau the SLTAP archaeologists excavated a magnificent elite dwelling that they named the “Red Palace.” This palatial residence, named for its impressive size and distinctive red floors, was built atop a large, low earthen platform. The building’s walls were constructed of rammed earth, and a massive cylindrical stone column at the center of the sizeable building had apparently served to support the main wooden beam for an extensive span of thatched roof. Large stone slabs embedded in the rammed-earth walls probably functioned as interior benches, while an L-shaped carved stone found at the front of the structure may have served as an entrance door threshold (fig. 12.2).

The Red Palace had more surprises in store for the archaeologists.



Fig. 12.2. Workers at San Lorenzo pose in the Red Palace with the two massive pieces of the broken cylindrical roof support column and the L-shaped door threshold. Photo by the author.

For example, as they excavated the building's red floor, they came upon a number of stone carvings and large basalt fragments resting on that floor. Associated with some of those carvings were stone flakes, abrasives for grinding, and stone tools. It soon became apparent that one area of the Red Palace had been utilized as a workshop dedicated to the resculpting or "recycling" of stone monuments. Similar activities likewise appear to have been carried out in two nearby buildings. Approximately forty "damaged" monuments were found in close proximity to the three structures, suggesting that perhaps the carvings were being stored for reprocessing. Monument making and recycling is discussed further in chapter 18.

One of the Red Palace's greatest surprises came when SLTAP archaeologists finally probed beneath the red floor. There they discovered an aqueduct line running directly under the building. Its form was, however, unlike that of any previously known Olmec aqueduct system. Instead of a straight-line system, the aqueduct beneath the Red Palace was constructed of curved, U-shaped basalt aqueduct stones laid out to form a sinuous snake-like channel (fig. 12.3). The unusual aqueduct segment had obviously served more than merely a utilitarian function.



Fig. 12.3. The sinuous aqueduct line running beneath the Red Palace at San Lorenzo. Note in the background the broken cylindrical column shown in fig. 12.2. Photo courtesy of Ann Cyphers.

For many years the Red Palace could not be investigated in its entirety because it extends onto the land of a farmer who refused permission for excavation. That situation has now been resolved and excavations have resumed on the structure.

The overall complexity and size of the Red Palace, together with its various stone architectural features and associated basalt workshop activities, highlight the special nature of this particular residence. It is tempting to hypothesize that one or more of the site's rulers dwelt there. That would be conjecture, but it is nevertheless obvious that the residents of the Red Palace occupied a very special place in Olmec society at San Lorenzo.

Twenty years earlier the Río Chiquito Project had noted numerous small mounds atop the plateau and conjectured that they were perhaps Olmec period house mounds (chapter 9). Given the goals of the SLTAP, the low mounds were obviously of interest, and therefore test excavations were carried out on a sample of them. The results surprised everyone. The mounds were not ancient at all, but had most likely been created by relatively recent ranching activities. Such results serve to remind archaeologists that presumptions based on surface observations always need to be tested by excavations.

Contemporaneous Projects Elsewhere in Olman

The SLTAP is the largest and most enduring project in the history of Olmec archaeological research, and its story is difficult to present in just one chapter. Furthermore, other research projects were being undertaken in Olman in the 1990s. Therefore, before we continue with the research at San Lorenzo, the next three chapters will discuss those co-eval investigations.

CHAPTER 13

El Manatí: “Like Digging in Warm Jell-O” (1987–1993)

The events leading up to one of the most significant discoveries in the history of Olmec archaeology began slowly unfolding about 10 mi. (16 km) to the southeast of the site of San Lorenzo. Like many archaeological discoveries, the find was serendipitous. Furthermore, it almost didn't happen. Indeed, the road to its revelation was strewn with obstacles and frustrations for everyone involved.

The impoverished residents of the tiny hamlet of El Macayal, Veracruz, located in a remote area of the vast floodplains of the Coatzacoalcos river system, were seeking a way to earn some income. Their solution was to attempt to raise fish commercially in ponds that they would dig by hand at a nearby freshwater spring. They began the laborious digging, but within a short time they started finding artifacts in the muddy soil: potsherds, an occasional greenstone celt, some bones, and sometimes a few objects that they thought to be old tree roots. On the hope that the presence of those archaeological materials might somehow inspire the government to provide their hamlet with much-needed basic amenities such as potable water and electricity, several residents set out on a 100 mi. (160 km) trek northward to the port city of Veracruz to inform the appropriate government archaeological authorities there. Due to El Macayal's isolation and the fact that for most of the year the hamlet was accessible only by boat, their task was difficult. Nevertheless, they eventually arrived at the INAH office in Veracruz city, advised someone there of their discoveries, and then returned to El Macayal to await results.

They waited for months, but no government representative showed up at El Macayal to view the finds. Thus a village delegation once again made the long trek to Veracruz city to relate their discoveries to INAH

officials. This time, as they were making their report, their story was by chance overheard by archaeologist María del Carmen Rodríguez. She believed their claims were worth investigating, and she set out for El Macayal soon afterward, accompanied by University of Veracruz archaeologist Ponciano Ortiz and ethnologist Daniel Nahmad. Their journey began with a long automobile drive south to the city of Minatitlán, after which they switched to a launch for a trip up the Coatzacoalcos River. After disembarking, they further endured a long horseback ride across the lowlands. Finally they trekked the last leg of their trip on foot through waist-deep swamps before arriving exhausted at El Macayal in late afternoon.

The discomforts of their long journey quickly faded when the villagers showed them some of the artifacts that had been found during pond construction. To the amazement of the weary travelers, the objects included three well-preserved anthropomorphic wooden busts, each about 18 in. (46 cm) tall. Preserved wooden objects are so rare in Mexican archaeology that any example is a momentous find; what made these even more astounding was that all three heads exhibited typical Olmec features (fig. 13.1). The extraordinary objects were the first wooden Olmec artifacts ever found, and they represented an entirely new category of Olmec art. The villagers of El Macayal had made a spectacular discovery!

It was dusk by the time the three visitors were taken to the location of the finds, two large fishponds at the base of the nearby Cerro Manatí. The *cerro* (hill) rises approximately 260 ft. (80 m) above the surrounding floodplains and is distinctly visible from the San Lorenzo plateau. Although both fishponds were already full of water and there was little for the archaeologists to see, the trio was informed by their hosts that additional wooden objects had probably been found. However, because the people of El Macayal had thought they were only digging up “old tree roots,” those pieces had been tossed aside and had dried out and disintegrated. Nevertheless, the villagers stated that once they recognized the significance of their finds, they started preserving subsequent discoveries by submerging them in water held in an old wooden canoe, and that is how the three wooden busts had been safeguarded.

Realizing that professional conservators from INAH would be needed at El Manatí to properly preserve and transport the wooden busts, the three investigators went back to Veracruz city empty-handed but greatly excited by the objects they had been shown and by the prospects of archaeological excavations at El Manatí. They returned to El



Fig. 13.1. Wooden Bust 20, "Dani," recovered at El Manatí. Approximately 18 in. (46 cm) tall. Photo courtesy of Ponciano Ortiz and Carmen Rodríguez.

Macayal several weeks later accompanied by skilled conservators from INAH's conservation department in Mexico City. To the group's astonishment, the villagers produced another nine wooden busts plus twenty-five polished greenstone celts for their inspection. All had been recovered while the villagers were digging the fishponds at El Manatí. Yet

as startling as those objects were, the villagers then brought out two dark gray grapefruit-sized objects for all to see. It took a few moments for everyone to realize that they were rubber balls—the oldest known rubber objects in Mexican archaeology! And after three thousand years, both balls still maintained a hint of the smell of latex rubber (fig. 13.2).

El Manatí was yielding the rarest of archaeological materials. Most new discoveries generate more questions than answers, and this site was no exception. What were such magnificent objects doing in this rural locale, 10 mi. (16 km) away from the nearest Olmec center, San Lorenzo? To answer that, the archaeologists would have to solve even more basic questions: What had been the context of these objects? Had the wooden Olmec busts been ritual offerings placed into the spring waters and remarkably preserved over the millennia by the mud?

The conservators had come to El Macayal with the intention of stabilizing the wooden busts so that they could be safely removed to conservation labs in Mexico City, where they would be carefully treated and studied. The villagers, on the other hand, had hoped that their discoveries would stimulate the state government into providing some very ba-



Fig. 13.2. Rubber ball from the site of El Manatí. Photo by the author.

sic services the community badly needed. Although initial contacts had been made with state officials, there was no visible progress being made on that issue. The villagers therefore refused to allow any of the magnificent archaeological objects to be taken away from El Macayal until a representative of the governor's office in Xalapa came to the hamlet to personally hear their request for services. This was a setback for the archaeologists and conservators, but not entirely a surprise in the history of Olmec archaeology. It echoed episodes at other Olmec sites where stone monuments desired by state and national museums were used as "ransom" by the villagers in order to obtain basic governmental services (chapter 8).

Negotiations between El Macayal and the state government resumed. Although their demands were not being quickly resolved, the villagers nevertheless permitted Carmen Rodríguez and Ponciano Ortiz to begin exploratory excavations at El Manatí. The two were assisted by a small but skilled volunteer crew of archaeologists eager to participate in the excavations. During a one-month period the investigators were able to excavate an area of approximately 100 sq. yards (90 sq m) immediately adjacent to the new fishponds. The rewards of that relatively brief exploratory season proved to be worth all of their efforts. Two wooden busts were unearthed, and as they came to light the excavators were able to study the sculptures in their actual archaeological contexts. As the first bust emerged, Rodríguez and Ortiz found evidence that the wooden sculpture had originally been wrapped in a reed mat and tied with cords. Adjacent to the bundle they discovered an unusual wooden knife and a greenstone celt. The overall context suggested that the bundle, knife, and celt had been placed together beneath the waters of the spring as a ritual offering. Over time the water and later sedimentation of the spring created conditions that preserved the wood and other organic materials.

The discovery of the second bust nearby confirmed the archaeologists' previous observations. Close inspection of the second sculpture revealed remains of palm leaves and cordage, but there was no clear sign that this bust had been wrapped in matting when it was deposited. However, a large concentration of red hematite had been placed with this second carving at the time of its deposition, and over the millennia the red color had stained both the wooden bust and the surrounding clay. The remains of possible plant bundles and human infant bones also occurred in the general area, and nearby excavations revealed the complete skeletal remains of a human infant.

Folk belief systems remain intact in many world areas today, and rural Veracruz is no exception. Thus, soon after the archaeologists' discovery of the first sculpture, the villagers of El Macayal came to Carmen and Ponciano with a request that was not a total surprise. They asked that the newly discovered wooden bust be baptized with water from the spring. They thought of it as an animate newborn baby and believed that the baptism would "remove the little devil from the child that was just born." The archaeologists respected the villagers' belief and carried out a baptism ceremony, during which the bust was christened as Vicky. In fact, for the same reason, all subsequent busts discovered were likewise given names in addition to their sequential discovery numbers. For example, Bust 17 (fig. 13.3) was Chico.

An agreement by the state government of Veracruz to construct a road to El Macayal and provide some basic services was not reached until some days after the one-month exploratory field season at El Manatí had ended. Nevertheless, with that agreement, the wooden busts and rubber balls that had been held for months by the villagers were turned over to INAH conservators. The objects were carefully packed and shipped to the restoration laboratories in Mexico City.

Carmen Rodríguez and Ponciano Ortiz were enthusiastic about the results of their first season's work. The following year—with the permission of the residents of El Macayal—they resumed excavations at El Manatí, assisted by a crew of ten archaeologists. Once again they began to bring to light more of the Olmec rarities, but their elation was short-lived. The road and other services the village had been promised by the state a year earlier had not yet materialized. The people of El Macayal called a town meeting to discuss the situation. The decision they reached was unsettling: the town would halt the excavations and, furthermore, they would hold all of the archaeologists as hostages until the state kept their part of the agreement! The archaeologists would not be permitted to excavate nor could they leave their encampment at El Macayal. However, the villagers also sought to assure the archaeologists that they were in no danger, but were merely being used to pressure the government. With that, a telegram was sent from El Macayal to the state capital informing the authorities of those actions.

What transpired is perhaps best described in the words of one of the participating archaeologists, Paul Schmidt of the UNAM: "The [state's] response did not take long. Helicopters skimmed over the village at tree top level. Police carrying submachine guns arrived [on the village outskirts] and scared every one of us. Our abduction ended after two days



Fig. 13.3. El Manatí Bust 17, "Chico." Photo courtesy of Ponciano Ortiz and Carmen Rodríguez.

when the village was told they would have to feed us. However, we were still prohibited from working, and six truck-loads of police still waited . . . nearby. After two weeks of tension a settlement was reached, work was begun on the road, and our excavations resumed."

In spite of the scare and a shorter field season than anticipated, the excavations at the spring unearthed eight more wooden busts, numerous

polished stone celts, three rubber balls, and a wooden ritual staff about 43 in. (110 cm) in length with a shark's tooth embedded into the knob-like tip. Furthermore, it was clear that not all of the busts had been solitary offerings. The sculptures named Lulu (5), Chispa (6), and Poc (7) had occurred together in a semicircle. Each had apparently been individually wrapped in a reed mat. In addition, tied bundles of plants and the cranium of an infant lay between the bundled carvings.

Carmen and Ponciano returned yearly to continue investigations at El Manatí (fig. 13.4). They expanded their research efforts into the areas of the fishponds themselves, an endeavor that required draining the ponds, diverting the spring waters away from the new excavation areas, and running gasoline-powered pumps to continually remove water from those pits. The work in those areas was particularly arduous. It was difficult for the excavators to move about in the gummy, water-logged mud of the pits, and nearly impossible to maintain the “archaeological ideal” of vertical sidewalls to their excavations. As Ponciano told me, “It was often like digging in warm Jell-O.”

It would be nice to report that following the initial “hostage” incident in 1989 the archaeologists encountered no further problems in the El Manatí research beyond the area's oppressive heat and legions



Fig. 13.4. Excavations at El Manatí, 1996. Note stepped sidewalls to protect against collapse. Photo courtesy of Paul Schmidt.



Fig. 13.5. El Manatí “Element 36”: six rubber balls and forty-six polished stone celts. Photo courtesy of Ponciano Ortiz and Carmen Rodríguez.

of mosquitos. However, that was not the case. Every year the villagers sought additional improvements for El Macayal, and every year the government delayed in fulfilling previous promises. The archaeologists were perpetually the pawns in those political battles. Every field season included a period during which they were held as hostages and their investigations suspended. One year they were held for a month and a half. Yet it must be admitted that the villagers had improved their own lives through their bellicose methods—El Macayal now boasts a modern road into the town, electricity, and potable water. Ponciano, however, reached the limit of his tolerance in 1993. By then, he told me, the El Manatí excavations were declining notably in productivity, and when he and his associates were once again held hostage, this time in demand for a village park, enough was enough. That became the final field season at El Manatí.

In spite of the many difficulties the researchers faced at El Manatí, by the end of the project 38 wooden busts, 19 rubber balls, 353 greenstone celts, and numerous greenstone beads had been recovered by archaeol-

ogists and villagers (fig. 13.5). Those artifacts give us a rare and privileged glimpse of one form of Olmec rituals. It is clear that the landmark hill and springs at El Manatí represented a sacred place to the Olmecs of that region. But the research at El Manatí also raises new questions. Who among the Olmecs made the offerings at the spring—pilgrims from San Lorenzo or from other Olmec settlements in the region? What or whom did the wooden busts represent? And, were wooden busts relatively common objects at Early Preclassic period Olmec sites, but only known today from El Manatí because of the unique preservation conditions there? Those questions remain unanswered.

CHAPTER 14

“They’re Blowing Up the Site!” Tres Zapotes after Stirling (1950–2003)

A Neglected Stepchild

Matt Stirling had been attracted to Tres Zapotes by the site’s Olmec colossal stone head, and his two years of research there in the late 1930s were intended to obtain the first archaeological data about the Olmecs. However, his project’s most significant discoveries, such as Stela C, with its early Maya-like Long Count date, were post-Olmec in time. Stirling soon turned his attention to another site with Olmec stone monuments, La Venta. The rich and exciting discoveries that he and Phil Drucker unearthed in La Venta’s Complex A quickly propelled that site to fame and helped make it the center of attention in Olmec studies for the next forty years. La Venta maintained its dominant position until the late 1960s, when projects by Michael Coe and then Ann Cyphers shifted scholarly attention to the Olmec center of San Lorenzo. During those decades, Tres Zapotes was more or less ignored.

Over that time period the ebb and flow of daily life continued virtually unchanged in the village of Tres Zapotes, although very occasionally a farmer working in his field would unearth an unusual artifact or a carved stone. Two important discoveries emerged in that way. In the early 1950s, a bulldozer clearing land 1 mi. (1.6 km) to the northeast of the area where Stirling had excavated brought to light a second Olmec colossal stone head. The second head, 4 ft. 10 in. (1.47 m) tall, was far more sophisticated and naturalistic in style than Tres Zapotes Head 1/Monument A (fig. 14.1). However, for some reason the discovery received little fanfare.

Furthermore, because it had been found beyond the site boundaries as defined by Stirling, a minor debate arose among some scholars.



Fig. 14.1. Tres Zapotes Colossal Head 2. Tuxteco Regional Museum, Santiago Tuxtla. Photo courtesy of Marcie Venter.

Should the second colossal head be included in the inventory of the Tres Zapotes stone monuments and labeled as Tres Zapotes Head 2 (or alternatively, Tres Zapotes Mon. Q), or should it instead be listed as coming from a separate site and called Nestepe (Nextepe) Head 1? Today, in the light of recent research that extends the site's limits, the former identification, Tres Zapotes Head 2, seems completely appropriate. For the village of Tres Zapotes, the issue became a moot point, because regional political authorities soon laid claim to the head and moved it to the main plaza in the town of Santiago Tuxtla, 10 mi. (16 km) away. Although there is no published record of how the villagers of Tres Zapotes felt at that time about the head's removal, some of their subsequent actions indicate that they were not pleased.

The second significant find was made almost exactly twenty years later. In 1970 a farmer working in his field in the same site area where Stela C had been found three decades earlier discovered a worked stone block with low-relief carving. Realizing that the stone might be important, he and some friends moved it to the small municipal building in Tres Zapotes for the villagers to see. There it was soon recognized to be

the missing upper section of Stela C! Of course, the lower section, unearthed by Matt Stirling, had been moved to Mexico City thirty-one years earlier and was on display in the National Museum of Anthropology. The residents of Tres Zapotes, fearful that state or federal authorities would attempt to claim this new discovery and remove it to Xalapa or Mexico City, locked it in a cell in their town's small jail.

By coincidence, at about that same time, a new archaeological project was just getting under way. The Tuxtla Olmec Project was initiated by Robert Squier, who had been a major participant in the 1955 La Venta excavations while he was a graduate student at UC-Berkeley (chapter 7). This new project's goals were to investigate the Tuxtla region of the Olmecs' domain by means of large-scale surface surveys and some test-pitting of selected sites. The project's Mexican co-director was Francisco "Paco" Beverido, a highly respected Veracruz archaeologist who had been a key member of Coe's Río Chiquito Project (chapter 9). In the division of labor for the project, Beverido directed investigations of the area around Tres Zapotes.

One of the first surface surveys that Beverido and his student crew carried out occurred in an area of the Tuxtla Mountains about 6 mi. (10 km) east of Tres Zapotes. One day, after a particularly long and hot hike through the lands of the Rancho Cobata, Beverido and the students stopped at noon to rest and cool down. Rather than sit in the dirt of the mountain trail, a few students selected a large rock for their resting place. They had been there for a short time when one of them remarked that the rock they were sitting on was unusually smooth and round, and jokingly suggested that it might be the top of a colossal head. The others thought it would be amusing to check out that idea, and after finishing their rest, they all began clearing soil away from around the stone. Within minutes, to their astonishment, they had revealed the eyes and nose of a colossal stone head!

They had, in fact, discovered the largest and most unusual of all the known colossal heads (fig. 14.2). The Cobata head's estimated weight of 40 tons is five times greater than either of the Tres Zapotes colossal heads. Furthermore, although it shares some stylistic similarities with the 4 ft. 10 in. (1.47 m) tall Tres Zapotes Head 1, the Cobata head is over 11 ft. (3.4 m) tall and about 9 ft. (2.7 m) in diameter. However, it is not as naturalistic or as portrait-like as any of the other Olmec colossal heads. Also unlike the others, its eyes appear to be closed. Some scholars have argued that it is an unfinished colossal head, but that remains a matter



Fig. 14.2. Cobata colossal stone head, today displayed on the plaza in Santiago Tuxtla. Photo courtesy of Marcie Venter.

of debate. Nonetheless, the Cobata head is very big and quite unusual, and I admit that I am still uncertain what to make of it.

The Cobata head was formally excavated soon after its discovery. That work disclosed that during the Late Classic period (c. AD 800), pottery offerings had been placed in front of the head's massive face, an indication that later peoples had revered the enormous carving, just as post-Olmec peoples had made offerings to the San Martín Pajapan statue (chapter 8). A few months later heavy equipment was brought to the Rancho Cobata, and the immense stone head was moved from its mountainside location down to the town of Santiago Tuxtla, where it now stands prominently in the center of the town's main plaza. Tres Za-

potes Head 2 is on display nearby, in a small archaeology museum facing that plaza.

Simmering Mistrust

Paco Beverido was obviously elated by the new find from the Rancho Cobata. However, as a scholar he was also quite interested in the recently discovered upper section of Stela C. He had seen it briefly during a visit to Tres Zapotes, but wanted to return in order to take photographs and make rubbings of the stone's faded carved motifs. Beverido approached the town authorities for their permission to make his study—the stone having been locked behind bars in the village jail—and it was granted. Nevertheless, when Paco and a small group of his students arrived in Tres Zapotes to look at the carving, some villagers were apparently unconvinced that their intentions were honorable. Within minutes the town's loudspeaker system began broadcasting to the villagers that archaeologists had come to take the stone away. The church bells were rung, a crowd gathered, accusations flew, and as Beverido narrates, "We were truly besieged by a multitude." It took a two-hour dialog with respected village elders before calm was restored. The archaeologists were then permitted to photograph the stone—but without moving it from its dark jail cell. It would be several more months before tensions eased to the extent that Beverido could return to make rice paper rubbings of the carvings on the stone. Moreover, the misunderstandings and mistrust from that incident would remain in the minds of some villagers and would eventually impact a future project at the site.

Unfortunately, Paco Beverido was soon in for another unpleasant surprise. After only about a year of research by the Tuxtlas Olmec Project, Robert Squier suddenly and inexplicably terminated the project and returned permanently to the U.S. Beverido and the project's other participants were stunned and bewildered. Although the cessation of the Tuxtlas Olmec Project was highly regrettable, the various events mentioned above nonetheless seem to have had some effect on Mexican governmental authorities, and they began to pay more attention to the village of Tres Zapotes. Within a few years a nicely designed archaeological museum was constructed in the village with government assistance, and it is still in operation today. The site's stone monuments are on public exhibit there, and the museum's display cases feature pottery vessels and figurines found at the site.

The villagers took pride in the museum, but they were also resentful that several of the site's important stone monuments, such as Stela C and Colossal Head 2, had been taken away to other museums. Their unhappiness reached a peak in the early 1980s when, without any advance notification, the governor of Veracruz sent a large crane truck to Tres Zapotes with the intention of removing Head 1 from the town museum, where it was exhibited outdoors, and transporting it to the state capital of Xalapa. By the time the villagers became aware that Head 1 was being taken away, the massive carving had already been placed onto the truck. The population quickly rose up in open protest. They barricaded the road leading out of town, and with machetes drawn, forced the truck's driver to reverse his course and return the colossal head to the town's museum. It remains there today.

The villagers of Tres Zapotes continue to remain vigilant and wary. Several international exhibitions of Olmec art have sought the temporary loan of a Tres Zapotes colossal head, and those requests have always been denied.

New Research Faces Old Problems

The premature termination of the Tuxtlas Olmec Project meant that the world of archaeology still lacked information on the role of Tres Zapotes in the Olmecs' world. In 1995 University of Kentucky archaeologist Chris Pool began to remedy that situation. His project, the Tres Zapotes Archaeological Survey (with its Spanish acronym RATZ) began exploring the site by way of intensive and extensive surface surveys to gather and record fundamental data on the locations of mounds and artifacts. Excavations would follow after that initial surface investigation. The RATZ research was greatly aided by the fact that over the seven-decade period since Stirling and Drucker's project there, the area's tropical forest had been replaced by fields of sugarcane and grass-covered pastures. The landscape along the 6 mi. (10 km) length of the valley floor was now more open and visible.

Logistics are often a problem at the beginning of any new project, and the RATZ proved to be no exception. The field crew was composed of ten experienced archaeology graduate students from U.S. and Mexican universities who needed to be housed and fed. Thanks to a number of small informal eateries in the village, Chris Pool was able to keep his field crew fed. However, finding lodging for them that first field season

was another matter altogether. Therefore, when village authorities offered the project a municipal building, the Casa Ejidal (farmers' cooperative building), as a temporary living space, the offer was gratefully accepted. The one-story building, constructed from cinder blocks and topped by a corrugated metal roof, consisted of one large room with a low stage at one end, and a single bathroom that lacked running water. Bathing and toilet flushing required using buckets of water obtained from an outside faucet. Handcrafted cots were obtained for the crew members to sleep on, making the accommodations at least tolerable. However, cinder-block buildings tend to absorb the heat of the day and retain it throughout the night, and the Casa Ejidal's single ceiling fan provided little relief from the oppressive tropical heat and humidity. The crew members nevertheless quickly adapted to the conditions, except perhaps for the fact that at night, large sugarcane spiders the size of human hands would emerge from hiding and position themselves equidistantly around the room's walls. Fortunately for all concerned, within a few months the project was able to move into more comfortable quarters elsewhere in the village.

The RATZ's initial work in 1995 primarily involved getting acquainted with the site and learning in some detail what was there. Because the valley was no longer burdened by the tropical forest, the project crew members were able to begin an extensive reconnaissance to discover the site's extent and boundaries. In addition, they undertook an intensive survey of the central site area. In the latter work, crews systematically walked the fields along predetermined transects, carefully recording all surface features (mounds, large artifacts, etc.) and making controlled collections of surface artifacts at 20 m (c. 65 ft.) intervals.

The project's first season was well under way when one afternoon the members of a survey crew came rushing back to the project's makeshift lab in the village, where Chris Pool was analyzing pottery that had been collected. They breathlessly informed him, "Chris, they're blowing up the site!" The students explained that they had been working along their transect near the center of the site when there was a loud explosion. They looked up and saw a large geyser of dirt erupt from a field about 100 yards (100 m) away. Two minutes later there was another explosion and eruption, this time closer to them. That was when they fled the scene and reported the incident to Chris.

Chris went out to the site area where his crew had been working and discovered lines of drill holes running across the fields. The holes had dirt and fragments of shattered PCV pipe scattered around them. Re-

turning to the village, he asked the local authorities about the explosions and was told that a geophysical company was conducting a seismic survey through the valley for Pemex. The explosions the RATZ crew witnessed were from dynamite charges. Upon inquiring further, Chris was informed that the geophysical tests were planned to pass right through the middle of the site! He immediately phoned the INAH office in Veracruz and informed them of the problem, and just as quickly INAH ordered the geophysical company to suspend testing, and a map of the official limits of the archaeological zone was sent to them.

The following day engineers from the geophysical company arrived at Tres Zapotes, and Pool went with them in their truck to look at the site's boundaries and to discuss the seismic prospecting there. On their way through the site, the chief engineer asserted that his company had had no idea that they were in an archaeological zone. The engineer made that statement at precisely the moment when the group was driving past an old and battered but prominently displayed sign saying *Zona Arqueológica*. Seeing the old sign, the chief engineer accused Chris of having erected it that morning! A few minutes later, as the group drove past archaeological mound groups on either side of the road, the engineer continued to maintain that his geologists had assured him that the mounds were natural and not man-made. Chris replied to the engineer that his company must have very poorly trained geologists working for them.

Because of the destruction that the seismic survey would cause, INAH prohibited the geophysical company from making any further tests at the site of Tres Zapotes. The local reaction, however, was unanticipated. Several weeks after the dynamite incident, Chris Pool and some crew members were returning to town from the site when their truck was stopped by a group of about fifty farmers with scowls on their faces and machetes in their hands. One of the village authorities, normally a jovial and friendly fellow, came to the truck window and said, "Chris, we have a problem."

Rather than trying to discuss the problem out on the street, Chris and the group of angry farmers assembled at the Casa Ejidal, which by then was no longer housing the RATZ crew. The complaint of the farmers was quite simple. They informed Chris that Pemex had promised to pay them reparations for the damage to their fields caused by the seismic survey explosions. Now, because INAH had shut down the geophysical work, Pemex was refusing to pay the farmers for those damages and laid the blame on the archaeologists. The farmers told him,

“We just want the money we’re owed.” Once again Chris had to make phone calls to the INAH office in Veracruz city, and they in turn had to contact Pemex. Pemex agreed to pay the farmers, but two weeks later the landowners confronted Chris again because Pemex was once more refusing to pay. More phone calls ensued and again a promise was extracted from Pemex. Eventually the farmers did receive their payments, although perhaps not the sum of money they had expected. Nevertheless, something positive resulted from that incident. The farmers began to view Chris Pool quite favorably because they realized that he had worked hard on their behalf in the payment dispute.

Memories of the Stirlings

One might think that after a period of sixty years there would be no one left in the village of Tres Zapotes who would remember the Stirlings’ work there in 1939 and 1940, but that was not the case. Some elderly villagers recalled that Matt Stirling had rotated his crews of workers to allow as many people as possible to work on the project, and they insisted that the RATZ do the same. Chris Pool was happy to oblige them. Several other villagers proudly showed RATZ project members photos of themselves with Matt or Marion Stirling. They had apparently been given those pictures by Richard Stewart, the National Geographic Society photographer who documented the project.

The practice and goals of archaeology are not always easy for some people, rural or urban, to comprehend. For example, observers often wonder why an archaeological project is collecting vast quantities of potsherds. Are the archaeologists somehow extracting gold from the broken pieces of pottery? Furthermore, rumors frequently develop that the archaeological project has found a treasure and has secretly made off with it (e.g., the allegedly purloined colossal stone head at San Lorenzo mentioned in chapter 12). The accusation by one aged resident of Tres Zapotes was only slightly different. He was critical of Matt Stirling for “taking all the gold,” and he claimed to have seen Stirling do so. The very elderly man strongly voiced that complaint at a town meeting that was attended by Chris Pool. When Chris responded to the assembled villagers that he had personally examined Stirling’s Tres Zapotes artifacts in storage at the Smithsonian Institution and that they contained nothing of gold from Tres Zapotes, some of the crowd looked at him as though he were an idiot and essentially replied, “Haven’t you been lis-

tening? Stirling *took* the gold. Of course it wouldn't be in the Smithsonian collections!"

Testing Buried Deposits

The RATZ archaeologists were aware that a report on Tres Zapotes written by Drucker in 1943 indicated that most vestiges of an Olmec period settlement at Tres Zapotes apparently lay deeply buried beneath the mounds and deposits of the site's post-Olmec inhabitants, and also beneath heavy alluvial and volcanic ash deposits. Thus in 1996, the RATZ supplemented its intensive and extensive surveys at the site with tests of deeply buried deposits. Many projects would have excavated pits for such tests, but that method can be inefficient in terms of time and labor, and also cannot easily penetrate the 10 to 20 ft. (3–6 m) of depth required to reach the site's deep Olmec deposits. The RATZ instead turned to a method that had not previously been employed to any significant degree in Olmec archaeology—auger testing. A 4 in. (10 cm) diameter auger was used, and auger holes were manually drilled down into the subsoil at c. 66 ft. (20 m) intervals along transects laid out across the floodplains. Each augering operation was carried out in 8 in. (20 cm) levels, and the materials captured by the auger from each level were carefully studied and recorded. Of course, all potsherds and other cultural materials were bagged, cataloged, and saved for analysis.

To reach deep deposits, extension pipes were added to the auger, and augering continued downward until either sterile soil or a depth of c. 20 ft. (6 m) was reached. Members of the augering crew soon became adept at recognizing soil changes, and from such data the RATZ was able to put together general subsurface stratigraphic profiles of each transect. One hundred and sixty-four auger tests of the floodplain were carried out in 1996 and 1997. Those tests confirmed that the alluvium of the floodplain covered and hid extensive cultural deposits, and also completely buried four large post-Olmec mounds.

There is a saying among archaeologists that for every hour spent working in the field, at least three hours of laboratory analysis will be required. In the three years of RATZ research, over four thousand controlled surface collections were accumulated, together with the large sample of materials recovered from the 164 auger tests. Analysis of those collections required another five years. While Chris Pool was able to make some initial interpretations on the basis of those data, he also

understood that any inferences being made from the RATZ surface collections and auger tests needed verification by excavations. He therefore returned to Tres Zapotes in 2003 with a new crew and excavated forty test pits at selected site areas.

The results exceeded his expectations. The excavations produced valuable data showing that the site's Middle Preclassic Olmec settlement may have covered an area of .5 sq. mi. (1.3 sq km). Several burials from that time period were unearthed, including a male individual accompanied by prismatic obsidian blades and seventy-two small jadeite beads. Moreover, while previously there had only been minimal evidence of an Early Preclassic Olmec period settlement at Tres Zapotes (equivalent in time to the apogee of San Lorenzo), some of the 2003 excavations that penetrated to a depth of c. 20 ft. (6 m) revealed unequivocal evidence that there had been a major Early Preclassic Olmec settlement at the site. Charcoal from the Early Preclassic deposits yielded a radiocarbon date of 1020 BC $\pm$ 40.

Lessons in Community Relations

The 2003 field season had been productive, but unfortunately, not without one more incident. It began when a local politician became annoyed at a decision by the town's authorities. The politician decided to retaliate against the authorities by fabricating a rumor about them and "leaking" it to the news media. The politician had recently visited the RATZ excavations and watched the unearthing of a modest burial. Although his complaint was totally unrelated to the RATZ, he nevertheless used the project as the basis of his rumor. The very next day Chris Pool happened to be listening to his car radio and heard a talk-radio personality on a statewide radio station announce that "foreign archaeologists are looting a tomb in Tres Zapotes in collusion with the local authorities." That evening the rumor was broadcast by television news shows in Veracruz city. The director of INAH-Veracruz lost no time in contacting Chris Pool and demanding to know what was going on at Tres Zapotes. Chris explained the situation to him, and twenty-four hours later the director arrived at Tres Zapotes accompanied by an entourage of municipal authorities and news reporters. The group toured the excavations, everyone saw that nothing was amiss, and another incident was put to rest.

Archaeological projects almost always have an impact on the local

populace, and the locals usually end up somewhat ambivalent in their feelings about the research. The populace is almost always tremendously friendly, gracious, generous, and helpful to the archaeologists. Yet at the same time they are also understandably suspicious, particularly at the start of a project, when the archaeologists are usually strangers to them. The words of an old lady in the village of Tres Zapotes sum up the dual feelings. She told Chris Pool, "It is okay with me if you work here, but if you people ever try to steal anything from us, I'll get my machete and stop you!"

As Chris once commented to me, "In addition to the problems related to the actual archaeological research, running an archaeological project can also be an interesting lesson in community relations." He's certainly correct, and his words would likely be echoed by almost every archaeologist mentioned in this book, as well as those working in other areas of the world.

CHAPTER 15

An Olmec Stone Quarry and a Sugarcane Crisis (1991)

The countryside near the Olmec center of Laguna de los Cerros is characterized by low, undulating hills—the final traces of the western piedmont of the Tuxtla Mountains. The hills and their shallow valleys are no longer forested, but instead are dominated by sugarcane fields that often seem to extend to the horizon in all directions. In 1991 my wife, Susan Gillespie, and I carried out joint research in that region, the Proyecto Olmeca La Isla–Llano del Jícaro, Veracruz. She directed investigations at an Olmec stone quarry and monument workshop identified by Alfonso Medellín in 1960: Llano del Jícaro. That project, discussed first in this chapter, provided information on some of the methods used by Olmec stone workers to shape monuments. My research, in contrast, attempted to investigate La Isla, a small Olmec secondary center about 5 mi. (8 km) to the northeast. It was a project that was stymied by a problem beyond our control and serves as another reminder that not all archaeological research attains its goals or makes noteworthy discoveries. Once again, community perceptions and relations were very important, and they may receive slightly more coverage in this chapter because the events happened to us.

Strangers Come to Town

The rural town of Hueyapan de Ocampo sits a few miles off of a major highway, amidst sugarcane fields. It is not far from either La Isla or Llano del Jícaro, which was an important factor when we selected it to be our home base. We arrived there in early February, just ahead of a crew of five Mexican and U.S. graduate students, and began a search for

housing. Hueyapan is a town of modest dwellings, and few were available. Finally, after several anxious days, we were able to rent two very spartan, unfurnished cinder-block houses. We were pleased that each at least had indoor plumbing, but that joy was short-lived. We soon discovered that Hueyapan's water system never had quite enough pressure to provide either house with anything more than a trickle of water in the plumbing. Fortunately, each house had a deep well from which we could all draw the many buckets of water that were needed for bathing, washing dishes, and flushing the toilet.

In the city of Acayucan, 25 mi. (40 km) to the south, we bought a small refrigerator and small stove for the kitchen of the "main house," seven handmade cots crafted from wooden poles and burlap, and lots of empty orange crates to use for storage and as bookshelves. We also bought mosquito nets and a few electric fans to provide everyone at least minimal comfort in the hot and humid nights. Susan and I occupied one of the two bedrooms in the main house, and a female doctoral student occupied the other. The four male crew members lived in the second house. We hired a woman to cook dinners for the project, and everyone ate communally in the main house on a picnic table generously loaned to us by a neighbor.

Hueyapan de Ocampo has an economy based mainly on sugarcane and cattle ranching, and is not a town that normally attracts visitors. What did the villagers think when we—strangers—showed up and began living there? Who were we? The town's authorities knew something of why we were there because we had presented our research permits to them. We also explained our presence to our landlady, our neighbors, the merchants of the town's few small stores, and to almost everyone else we met. Nevertheless, the word apparently spread very slowly, and in the meantime, local imaginations and musings became active. Some villagers thought we might be crew members from a major Hollywood movie studio that at that moment was filming the movie *Medicine Man* (starring Sean Connery) at Lake Catemaco in the Tuxtla Mountains, an hour's drive north of Hueyapan. Others guessed that we were members of the small circus that had just arrived in town and was giving nightly performances on the village's plaza. (The circus actually consisted of a man, his wife, five dogs, and a few trained doves, all housed in a car and a small trailer parked beside the plaza.) Fortunately, over the weeks more and more villagers came to understand our purpose in town.

Small towns can also be suspicious of newcomers, but we gained the confidence and welcome of the town because of an unforeseen circum-

stance. The female doctoral student had brought her infant daughter, Alice, with her to Hueyapan. Whether that decision was wise is perhaps debatable, but baby Alice immediately captured the hearts of all the women in our part of town. Neighbors would drop by daily to visit the baby; I don't recall that a day went by without someone in the village stopping us to inquire about her. Neighbor women were eager to babysit Alice while her mother was carrying out her daily research tasks. The baby's presence seemed to assure the town that we were people with good intentions. It soon became clear to us that the entire neighborhood watched out for Alice's well-being (and ours) day and night.

Stone Quarry and Monument Workshop

The early investigators of La Venta and San Lorenzo understood that most Olmec carvings at those sites had been sculpted from basalt, a stone type that had been brought, possibly in the form of large boulders, from distant sources and at a great expenditure of human labor. However, it was not until the 1960s that mineralogical analyses demonstrated that the basalt had come from the Tuxtla Mountains in the northeast region of Olman. Nonetheless, many other aspects of monument creation and transportation remained a puzzle. Had the monuments been carved at basalt quarries in the Tuxtla Mountains, or, alternatively, had boulders been transported to San Lorenzo and La Venta to be sculpted later by local artisans? What technology and techniques had Olmec stone workers—who lacked metal tools—used to shape the stones? And, of course, how had the large stones—whether carved or uncarved—been transported from the quarries to the distant centers?

Such questions were among those investigated by Susan Gillespie's project at Llano del Jícaro, a site about 5 mi. (8 km) northwest of the Olmec center of Laguna de los Cerros. The site had been briefly explored in 1960 by Alfonso Medellín (chapter 8), who had recognized it to be an Olmec stone quarry site and monument workshop. However, he never published a formal report on the results of his brief work there.

Llano del Jícaro is not visually imposing (fig. 15.1). It consists of a number of large, grass-covered pastures (*llanos*) on a flat hilltop that overlooks the broad valley containing Laguna de los Cerros. Scattered about those grassy *llanos* are thickets of scrubby tropical vegetation, including *jícaro* (tree gourd) trees, growing amid clusters of very large basalt boulders. Those boulders are the surface remnants of ancient lava



Fig. 15.1. The author stands beside a weathered “channel stone” in pastureland at Llano del Jícaro. Photo by Susan Gillespie.

flows from the Tuxtla Mountains that also form the bedrock of the area under a thin mantle of soil. In the distant past, some of the basalt boulders at Llano del Jícaro were selected and carved by Olmec stone workers.

Susan and I had been introduced to Llano del Jícaro (and La Isla) a few years earlier by Ponciano Ortiz and Carmen Rodríguez (chapter 13). During that visit Ponciano was able to locate and show us five worked stones that he knew of from Medellín’s work and his own previous visits to the site. How many other worked stones remained at the quarry? To answer that question the Proyecto Llano del Jícaro (PLJ) began with a thorough reconnaissance of the site. All the crew members and the PLJ’s four locally hired workers scoured the grassy areas (pastures), and with machetes chopped paths into the thickets in a search for additional worked stones. That exploration revealed four more carved stones, bringing the overall total recorded at the site to nine. They were classified into four types: altar-thrones, stelae, slabs, and “channel stones.”

The most impressive carving was an unfinished Olmec altar-throne (fig. 15.2) approximately 6.5 ft. (2 m) long, 4 ft. (1.2 m) deep, and 4 ft. (1.2 m) tall. Its sides were straight and smooth, and sculptors had begun creating a niche on its front face. Those two traits suggested that the



Fig. 15.2. Unfinished altar-throne at Llano del Jícaro. Note the partially completed frontal niche, the unusual projecting tab (left side of the photo), and the horizontal fracture that ruined the nearly completed carving. Photo by Susan Gillespie.

sculptors had begun the final stages of production. However, the unfinished monument exhibited an unusual feature that does not occur on the finished altar-thrones of La Venta and San Lorenzo: a large vertical rectangular tab protruding from one side of the piece. The tab's presence suggested that it had served an important purpose either during the sculpting work or later, during the monument transportation process, after which it would have been removed.

Medellín had come upon the unfinished altar-throne in his 1960 investigations. At that time, it was lying in two pieces, for at some time in the past it had split completely in half horizontally. He had his men reunite the two pieces, and the altar-throne was still correctly reassembled when we arrived in 1991. The PLJ's excavations revealed that the Olmec stone workers had first carefully laid a platform of flattish stones to rest the carving upon, raising it above the ground surface. They had apparently laid the altar-throne on its back side as they worked on it. Unfortunately, that position may have caused the carving to split in two pieces along an undetected fissure in the stone. Because the altar-throne

was never finished, it seems probable that the event happened during the sculpting process, and the uncompleted carving was abandoned.

Medellín had also discovered a second unfinished carving at the site, a 6.5 ft. (2 m) tall stocky anthropomorphic statue in a seated pose (fig. 15.3). The sculpture has an oversized head and large raised rectangular areas where the eyes should be. The statue's surface is intensively peck-marked from the blows of the hammerstones used by the Olmec sculptors to shape the large carving, but is not smoothed by grinding as one would expect from a finished piece. Medellín had the large statue moved to the museum in Xalapa, where it is now on display, although he cataloged it within the corpus of monuments from Laguna de los Cerros as Monument 8. It is not included with the nine stones at Llano de Jícaro recorded by the PLJ's reconnaissance.

The PLJ test-excavated four of the site's worked stones. Each was found to be at a different stage in the monument production process. The excavations uncovered a variety of stone tools, lots of debitage (the stone flakes and other waste created as the boulders were struck to shape them), and small quantities of Olmec period potsherds. The four excavated stones, together with the two unfinished sculptures found at the site by Medellín, revealed a fairly basic and slow sculpting procedure.

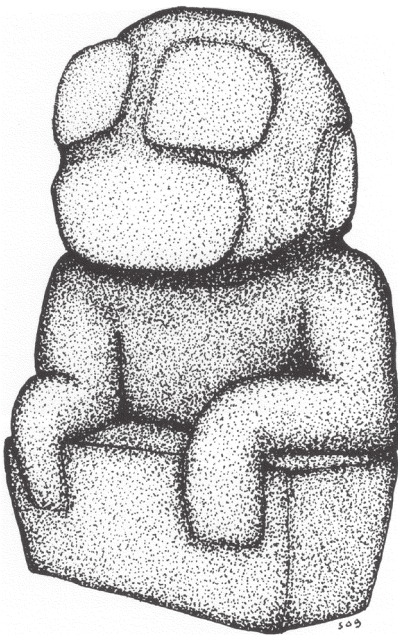


Fig. 15.3. Large unfinished seated anthropomorphic statue from Llano del Jícaro. Museum of Anthropology, Xalapa. Drawing courtesy of Susan Gillespie.

The shaping of a stone began by trimming it down to a rough basic form using percussion. The early blows, by means still unclear, resulted in large flakes. After initial shaping, the Olmec stone workers apparently used hard hand-sized stone nodules (hammerstones) to pound and then eventually peck the proto-monument into its final shape. Some of those hammerstones were found in the excavations. The monument's surfaces were then ground smooth using other stones.

Llano del Jícaro's unfinished anthropomorphic statue and nearly completed altar-throne are evidence that, at least at this Olmec stone quarry, carvings were formed and semi-finished prior to transportation elsewhere. It seems probable that finishing touches were added after a preformed carving had been successfully transported to its final destination. The risk of damaging detailed features on a finished monument during its long-distance transport would have been too great. No Olmec leader would have been happy if his portrait statue arrived missing a nose or damaged in some other way. (Monument transport is discussed in chapter 18.)

Five of the worked stones at Llano del Jícaro still puzzle me. Their form and size suggest that they were not created to be monuments but instead somehow functioned in the monument production process. Each of these is large and oblong to rectangular in its natural shape (fig. 15.4; see also fig. 15.1). The most visible evidence of stone-working is a long, shallow, rectangular channel carved along the length of its upper surface. Although the channel in each of those stones makes them vaguely reminiscent of the aqueduct stones found at San Lorenzo and La Venta, the overall dimensions and forms of the Llano del Jícaro stones are significantly different. A possible clue to the use of these "channel stones" is the fact that a slightly raised area occurs near the midpoint of each of the channels. Thus, a pole laid in the channel could have been rocked about 15 degrees up and down like a teeter-totter. But why?

Susan's excavations of one of the channel stones uncovered two broken circular basalt disks (fig. 15.5), each about 7 in. (18 cm) in diameter and 2.5 in. (6.3 cm) thick. One side of each disk has a slightly raised rim. Significantly, Medellín reported finding such a disk under the unfinished statue (Mon. 8). Similar disks were also found at San Lorenzo by the Río Chiquito Project, and more recently by Ann Cyphers, who unearthed the artifacts in the monument recycling area of the Red Palace at San Lorenzo (chapter 12). The presence of those unusual stone disks in monument workshop contexts at both Llano del Jícaro and San Lorenzo indicates that they functioned somehow in the monument-



Fig. 15.4. Channel stone, Llano del Jícaro. The channel is deeper at each end and shallow at the midpoint. The function these stones served is uncertain. Photo by Susan Gillespie.

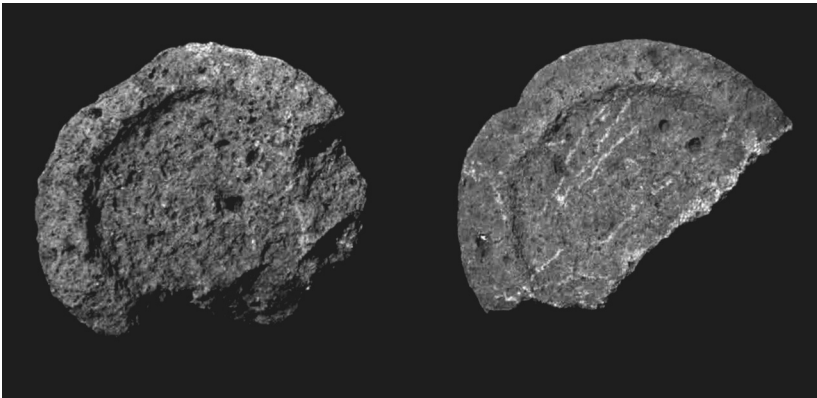


Fig. 15.5. Broken basalt disks recovered during excavations of a channel stone at Llano del Jícaro. Similar disks have been found at San Lorenzo. They seem to have played a role in monument production at both sites. Photo by Susan Gillespie.

sculpting process. However, at present their role, like that of the channel stones, remains unclear.

La Isla: A Run of Bad Luck

As previous chapters have noted, for many years knowledge of the Olmecs was based almost entirely on data obtained by the relatively limited excavations at the major Olmec centers of La Venta and San Lorenzo. As late as 1990, archaeologists still had no idea what smaller Olmec settlements were like, nor did we know anything about the life-ways of Olmec commoners. However, those smaller settlements and the people who inhabited them would have comprised the majority of the Olmec world. It seemed to me that our view of the Olmecs was therefore top-heavy, skewed toward the Olmec elites. I hoped to begin rectifying that situation by excavating a small Olmec settlement. Archaeologists Ponciano Ortiz and Carmen Rodríguez suggested I investigate La Isla, a site not far from Hueyapan de Ocampo. At the time of our exploratory visit to La Isla with them in 1984, we observed Olmec period potsherds on the ground surface. In addition, two Olmec monument fragments from La Isla were exhibited in front of Hueyapan's small municipal building: a statue head with a snarling visage, and a large anthropomorphic torso.

La Isla is situated on a bluff about 20 ft. (6 m) above the junction of two small rivers, the Amayo and the Hueyapan. Both rivers have been eating away at the bluff and the site for countless years, leaving it as a kind of "island" between them. In one area the erosion by the Río Amayo had even cut away half of a pre-Hispanic mound atop the bluff. Municipal authorities informed us that the two Olmec monument fragments that we saw in Hueyapan had been found on separate occasions at the base of the bluff below the bisected mound, after periods of heavy rains led to river flooding and erosion. The presence of those two stone monuments indicated that La Isla had been important enough in the Olmec world to display at least two stone carvings. Perhaps it had been a small Olmec secondary center. At the time of our initial visit the site was covered by a crop of sugarcane, but we inspected it as best we could. I felt that La Isla had the potential to provide the kind of data I was seeking.

I timed the start of our investigations in 1991 for the month of February, when the region's sugarcane fields would be burned and harvested.

Once the harvesting had cleared La Isla of its dense cover of sugarcane, we could begin our research. In fact, the original plan for coordinating the Llano del Jícaro and La Isla projects had been to start first at La Isla, because timing the initial work there with the sugarcane harvest was crucial. However, almost as soon as we got our housing established in Hueyapan de Ocampo and were ready to get to work, the town—and our projects—received very troubling news. A labor strike was sweeping through the sugarcane processing mills in that region of southern Veracruz, shutting all of them down. The cane farmers in Hueyapan de Ocampo and throughout the area dared not burn and harvest their fields because there was no place to take their crops for processing. We would have to delay investigations at La Isla until the strike ended and the sugarcane was harvested. Because our research schedules were flexible, we turned our efforts to the investigations at Llano del Jícaro and waited for the strike to end.

Unfortunately, the sugar mill strike dragged on for weeks, and a dense field of cane still covered La Isla. The work at Llano del Jícaro was finished, and only a few weeks remained before it would be time to return to the U.S. Therefore I attempted to salvage something from the La Isla project. An unplanted strip of land about 12 ft. (3.7 m) wide separated the sugarcane at La Isla from the bluffs of the river embankments. Furthermore, the remains of the mound that had been halved by river erosion lay within that area of the site. Because the river cut had exposed the mound's interior, we used that to our advantage and carried out excavations of the interior. Those excavations revealed three construction phases for the mound, but all of them were Classic period (c. AD 300–600) and thus post-Olmec. Importantly, during all three construction periods the mound's earthen fill contained significant amounts of Middle Preclassic period Olmec potsherds.

In addition to excavating within the mound, we excavated several stratigraphic pits on the periphery of the mound. When our research time drew to a close, our deepest of those excavations had reached a depth of 9 ft. (2.7 m), but it was still in Classic period deposits! None of our excavations had penetrated deep enough to reach Olmec levels. That situation left us with a conundrum. Everyone in Hueyapan de Ocampo asserted that the two monument fragments from La Isla had both been found at the base of the bluff below the heavily damaged mound, yet that mound postdates those carvings by almost one thousand years. A possible answer comes from Alfonso Medellín's 1960 research at nearby Laguna de los Cerros. His excavations there revealed

that Classic period peoples had moved and reused Olmec carvings. It is possible that the various fragmentary carvings found at La Isla had eroded out of Olmec period levels deeply buried beneath the mound. However, I believe that it is more likely that the Classic period inhabitants of La Isla found the monument fragments and incorporated them into the mound's construction.

Some Final Surprises

On one of the final weekends of our stay in Hueyapan the student crew members returned from a local fiesta with an invitation to see a "stone figure" at a ranch about a mile from Llano del Jícaro. We had earlier been taken to several places by local residents to see a stone "Buddha," "jade figurines," and even a small (c. 18 in./46 cm tall) "colossal stone head," none of which turned out to be genuine Olmec carvings. So, although we were skeptical, we nevertheless arranged to meet with the ranch owner. When we arrived the rancher greeted us warmly, and in describing the carving mentioned to Susan that "you can even see the figure's toes." With that specific detail, we became somewhat more optimistic.

The hot afternoon sun beat down on us as we hiked across grasslands to the edge of a low escarpment overlooking the valley, where we could see the tall mounds of Laguna de los Cerros in the distance. Any skepticism we had quickly vanished, for there stood a remnant of a small Olmec statue (fig. 15.6). It had once depicted a personage seated cross-legged atop a cylindrical pedestal, but the carving had suffered the fate of so many Olmec monuments—it had been purposely broken in antiquity. Only the lower half of the seated human figure remained, broken off at the torso. But the rancher had not exaggerated: the toes were indeed visible. (Monument mutilation is discussed in chapter 18.)

About a week later our landlady came over in mid-afternoon for a chat and a glass of limeade. She had heard of our excitement over the carving shown to us by the rancher, and during our conversation she asked, "Wouldn't you like to go see the stone in my brother-in-law's backyard?" It was sweltering outside, but the brother-in-law's house was only a few blocks away, and so we went with her. His backyard turned out to be a shady and cool oasis planted in banana palms and small fruit trees. Our landlady led us to a barely noticeable squarish stone lying in the weeds nearby. Susan and I could both see that one of the exposed



Fig. 15.6. The author stands by a mutilated Olmec statue at El Cardonal, near Llano del Jícaro. Photo by Susan Gillespie.



Fig. 15.7. Decapitated “were-jaguar” statue head found at La Isla by a resident of Hueyapan de Ocampo. Photo by the author.

sides of the stone had a deep, cross-shaped groove carved in it. Susan excitedly remarked, "It's a statue head!" and turned the stone over. Staring up at us was a snarling Olmec "were-jaguar" face (fig. 15.7). We were surprised and elated. And where had the carving been found? Of course, we could have guessed the answer: "Years ago, on the riverbank below the mound at La Isla, after a heavy rainstorm and river flooding."

About 9 p.m. on our final night in Hueyapan de Ocampo there was a knock on the front door of our house. It was the adult son of the landowner of La Isla. He had come to bid us good-bye. He also passed on a surprising piece of news: "Our cane field at La Isla got burned today." I was taken aback because we'd waited two months for the field to be burned and cleared, and now we were departing in a few hours. But then he continued, "Yes, a neighbor was burning his cane field and the flames got out of control and set our fields ablaze too. We have only two days in which to harvest the crop and get it to the mill; otherwise the crop will be a loss." Sadly, I understood the reality of what he was telling me. The mills were still on strike. The crop would not be salvaged.

On our initial visit to Hueyapan de Ocampo with Ponciano and Carmen several years earlier, an Olmec statue head and a large stone torso had been displayed in front of the town's small municipal building. However, when we returned to begin our research they were no longer there, but had been taken to the anthropology museum in Xalapa. Grumblings from some of the townspeople suggested that the removal had not been with their approval.

Susan and I loaded our minivan and began our drive back to the U.S. On our way we stopped by the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa. We were anxious to look at the La Isla carved torso fragment now being displayed there. Our examination took only a few minutes and resolved a question in our minds. The imperfections running through the stone torso, and the shape of the decapitation break on its top surface, matched perfectly with the features of the snarling statue head we had been shown in our landlady's brother-in-law's backyard (see fig. 15.7). They were pieces of the same sculpture, but were now separated by over 150 mi. (240 km). If some day they are reunited, we hope it will be in a manner acceptable to the people of Hueyapan de Ocampo.

CHAPTER 16

Discoveries Large and Small at San Lorenzo (1990–2012, Part 2)

Beyond the Center: The Hinterland and the *Isloles*

At the start of the final decade of the twentieth century archaeologists still knew very little about what kind of Olmec sites, if any, lay within the vast regions separating the centers of San Lorenzo, La Venta, Laguna de los Cerros, and Tres Zapotes. Some areas on the periphery of the Olmecs' domain had been partially explored, but most of Olman, including the region surrounding San Lorenzo, remained an archaeological "terra incognita."

As mentioned in chapter 12, a goal of Ann Cyphers's SLTAP was to understand San Lorenzo's position within Olman, both geographically and socially. If the site had indeed been a major Olmec center, then it must have overseen a regional hierarchy of other Olmec villages and hamlets. But what was the nature of that hierarchy? Stirling and Drucker's 1946 research at San Lorenzo included brief investigations at two smaller sites near the base of the San Lorenzo plateau, Potrero Nuevo and Tenochtitlán, and the Río Chiquito Project conducted further excavations at the latter site. Nevertheless, those research efforts did not provide a larger and more encompassing picture of the quantity and types of Olmec settlements that had existed in the region encircling San Lorenzo.

The SLTAP therefore set out to investigate San Lorenzo's hinterland and provide the missing information. Because it was the first serious exploration of that archaeologically unknown area, the information the archaeologists wanted could not be acquired simply by examining aerial photographs or satellite images, or by other high-tech methods. The data could be obtained only one way—on foot! From 1991 to 1994, re-

connaissance teams from the SLTAP systematically walked the floodplains, the hills, the river levees, and all other land areas surrounding San Lorenzo. They were searching for archaeological evidence of Olmec villages, hamlets, and homesteads.

The members of those survey teams endured the region's intensive heat and humidity on a daily basis, moving through the dense, tick-laden vegetation and being constantly on guard for hidden dangers such as poisonous snakes or hives of killer bees, all the while looking for indications of past settlements. Signs of human activity might include potsherds, obsidian flakes, stone wall lines, or earthen mounds. When such clues were found, the newly discovered site was carefully studied to determine its approximate size, any architectural features (e.g., stone wall lines, mounds), and its probable time range. This latter estimate was made on the basis of the pottery sherds and other artifacts found on the site's surface. For each site, a representative sample of surface artifacts was collected, a basic map was made, and an identification number was assigned. Every night, back at the project camp in Tenochtitlán, the day's new discoveries were added to a regional map and registry of archaeological sites, and the surface collections were prepared for analysis.

The SLTAP teams investigated an area of approximately 150 sq. mi. (390 sq km) and recorded 271 sites. Individually those sites span a time range from c. 1500 BC to AD 1000, but over 80 percent show evidence of Olmec occupation contemporaneous with the zenith of San Lorenzo, 1150–900 BC. However, only 24 percent of those same sites show any evidence of having been occupied during the subsequent 900–500 BC time period coeval with the Olmec center of La Venta (Middle Pre-classic), indicating a major demographic change at the regional level at about 900 BC.

One of the biggest surprises from the regional reconnaissance was the unexpectedly large number of sites with evidence of having been inhabited in pre-Olmec times, from 1500 to 1150 BC—the Ojochi, Bajío, and Chicharras phases as defined by Coe's Río Chiquito Project (chapter 9). Pre-Olmec potsherds were found at nearly 40 percent of the 271 sites recorded by the SLTAP. Furthermore, over one-half of the sites with pre-Olmec ceramics are *islotas* (islets)—small, low, man-made mounds located on the seasonally inundated riverine floodplains surrounding the San Lorenzo plateau. The upper surfaces of *islotas* are somewhat higher in elevation than the normal level of the yearly floodwaters, so during most periods of annual flooding the *islotas* literally do become small islands. About a dozen *islotas* were test excavated by the

SLTAP, revealing that the majority of them had been utilized and re-utilized over a time span of over five hundred years, from the Ojochi through the San Lorenzo phases. That fact, along with the sheer number of *islotas*, indicates that they had played an important role in the region's settlement history. But what was that role?

Excavations revealed that there had been a house-like structure on each *islote*, suggesting that perhaps each had been inhabited by a single family or household unit. The archaeological data are not precise enough to determine whether the small man-made islands had been occupied throughout the year or only seasonally, but during flood periods access to them would have been by canoe. If the floodwaters rose to unexpectedly high levels, an *islote's* residents might have followed a practice used by inhabitants of the region today. When floodwaters rise too high, a house's occupants merely move up into the rafters area of their dwelling and live there until the floodwaters subside.

From the location and quantity of the *islotas* it can be presumed that their inhabitants exploited the floodplain's resources, and it must have been in part for the benefit of those living on the San Lorenzo plateau. Such exploitation would have varied with the seasons: fish and other aquatic resources during the rainy season when the area was flooded, and when the waters ebbed, waterfowl and reeds for making baskets. As the dry season progressed, some agriculture could have been carried out around the perimeters of low-lying areas that still retained moisture. Perhaps one significant clue to the function of the *islotas* lies in the peculiar long rectangular fire pits common to every *islote* excavated (fig. 16.1). Ann Cyphers believes that these had probably been utilized for a task such as smoke-curing fish.

The *islotas* occur in greatest number near San Lorenzo and decline in quantity with distance from the plateau. However, in the hinterland they do not disappear completely, nor are they a phenomenon only of the San Lorenzo region. They are now being recognized as present in the floodplains over a wide area of Mexico's southern Gulf coast, including the region around the Olmec site of La Venta.

Tons and Tons of *What?*

One of the most amazing and unusual discoveries made at San Lorenzo involves some of the smallest artifacts that have been found at the site (fig. 16.2). The small objects were first noticed at Tres Zapotes during



Fig. 16.1. *Islote* excavation near San Lorenzo. Ann Cyphers and archaeologist A. Vega look at a Preclassic period floor and large rectangular fire pit uncovered in the excavation. Photo by the author.



Fig. 16.2. Ilmenite cubes from excavations at San Lorenzo. Photo by the author.

Stirling and Weiant's 1938–1939 field season, but did not receive much attention. Tucked away in Weiant's 1943 monograph on the pottery of that site is a two-sentence statement: "A number of galena specimens were found. . . . They are all roughly cubical in shape, and perforated by drilling two holes meeting in the center at right angles." Fourteen similar artifacts were recovered three decades later by the Río Chiquito Project's excavations at San Lorenzo. Those were described as "multi-

drilled iron ore beads” and “of a somewhat irregular oblong shape, as though nodules of the appropriate shape had been picked up and only slightly worked.” Their average size was about $1.25 \times 1.25 \times .75$ in. ($3 \times 3 \times 2$ cm), and they weighed slightly over 1 oz. (28 g) each. But how had these small objects been used by the Olmecs? Had they perhaps served a mundane function such as weights for the fishing nets used by commoners? Or, alternatively, were they indeed perforated “beads,” a luxury item perhaps worn by Olmec rulers and elites? Four decades ago, when fewer than two dozen of these objects were known, such hypotheses seemed reasonable. However, nobody could have anticipated how dramatically the situation would change during the explorations by the SLTAP.

A farmer at Loma del Zapote, a low hill (*loma*) 3 mi. (5 km) south of San Lorenzo, first brought perforated iron ore cubes there to the attention of Ann Cyphers. While cultivating his plot of hilltop land he began noticing small metallic pieces scattered about in the soil and started collecting them. By the time Ann and her crew visited Loma del Zapote, the farmer had amassed several pounds of the objects, and he showed the archaeologists his collection. Excited by his finds, they asked for and received his permission to let them make a more systematic search of the hilltop. The result was astonishing. Instead of picking up another one or two pounds of the cubes, the archaeologists collected over ten thousand pieces. All were concentrated in just one area of the hilltop, and there was no archaeological evidence of an Olmec settlement in the immediate area. It was a puzzle.

The iron ore from which most of the known cubes were made has now been identified as ilmenite, whose nearest known source is 120 mi. (190 km) southeast of San Lorenzo, in the state of Chiapas. Ilmenite was therefore an import into Olman, a fact that suggests that it had a special value to the Olmecs.

While the Loma del Zapote ilmenite concentration was remarkable, that find was soon surpassed at San Lorenzo itself when a worker brought Ann Cyphers some ilmenite cube fragments. He had noticed them while walking to work through a cultivated area of papaya trees at the southwestern edge of the plateau. Ann related the story to me: “We hiked with the worker over to the area where he had been picking up the cubes. Because the dense concentration of ilmenites at Loma del Zapote was still in the back of our minds, we brought along a metal detector so that if there was another concentration, we could perhaps locate it more

precisely. But when we got there and turned the metal detector on, it went totally crazy. We couldn't pinpoint anything!"

Excavations quickly discovered why the metal detector had gone "totally crazy." There were *three* massive concentrations of ilmenite cubes in that area, and they occurred in three large pits. The first pit the archaeologists uncovered was 40 in. (1 m) in diameter and 40 in. (1 m) deep, and it was filled with approximately sixty-four thousand broken cubes. Those ilmenite fragments had a combined weight of 4400 lbs. (1996 kg)! The second pit was smaller and contained only 350 lbs. (159 kg) of cubes, most of which were unbroken. The third pit, 8 ft. (2.4 m) in diameter and 2 ft. (60 cm) deep, contained 5,500 lbs. (2495 kg) of complete cubes! That one area of San Lorenzo yielded approximately 140,500 complete and broken ilmenite cubes.

The quantity of ilmenite objects found in the three pits at San Lorenzo is astonishing. However, what compounds the puzzle of these artifacts is the fact that ilmenite cubes occur in minor numbers in every Olmec house excavated at San Lorenzo, as well as in smaller rural Olmec houses in San Lorenzo's hinterland. The cubes were therefore used by all levels of Olmec society. But how and for what purpose had they been used?

An analysis of the cubes offers some important clues. Two holes perforate each cube at right angles to each other (see fig. 16.2). Careful inspection of the holes indicates that they were created by abrasion from rotational "drilling." The positioning and depth of the two holes indicates that just before the first drill hole penetrated completely through a cube, the drilling process was stopped. The cube was then turned 90 degrees, and a second hole was drilled into the cube until it too had nearly completely penetrated the cube. At that point the cube apparently reached the end of its utility, but used and broken cubes were nevertheless retained and eventually cached.

Ann Cyphers and colleague Anna di Castro believe that the cubes were used as bearings or points of support for the rod of a bow drill, with the rod's rotation slowly abrading a hole into the small ilmenite block (fig. 16.3). They further suggest that the creation of a second hole in the same cube was an economical measure intended to get as much usage from a cube as possible. While evidence is accumulating in favor of the bow drill hypothesis, some questions remain unanswered. For example, if the small ilmenite blocks were used as "bearings" for a bow drill, why was an imported material required for that task? Further-

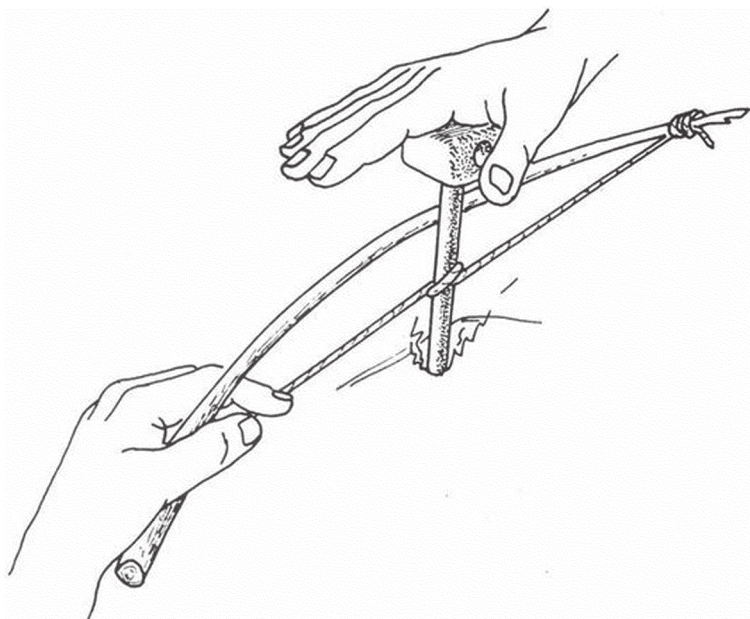


Fig. 16.3. Illustration of how ilmenite cubes might have been used as bearings for a bow drill. Drawing courtesy of Ann Cyphers.

more, what production process carried out at Olmec centers as well as small hamlets would have involved a bow drill and likewise have been so significant that a “costly” import was obtained and utilized for this purpose? Couldn’t local objects, such as potsherds or pieces of dried bottle gourds, perhaps have served the same function? For now, the ilmenite cubes remain one of the many enigmas of the Olmecs.

Keeping a Promise: The Community Museum

Prior to 1990 and the start of the SLTAP’s research, nine colossal heads, a massive altar-throne, and numerous sculptures had been taken away from San Lorenzo to distant museums. When Ann Cyphers initiated the SLTAP she gave her promise to the villagers of Tenochtitlán that the monuments found by her project would stay in the village (chapter 12). During the decade of the SLTAP’s investigations, sixty additional sculptures of various sizes were unearthed, doubling the total number known at San Lorenzo. As those sculptures came to light, Ann

and the villagers began planning a community museum to be built next to the SLTAP's encampment. Although a community museum had been constructed at that location in the mid-1980s—as partial compensation to the village for the removal of Colossal Heads 7, 8, and 9 to the museum in Xalapa—it was rustic and poorly constructed. It had deteriorated quickly, and within a few years was unusable.

The SLTAP's discovery of "Tiburcio" (Colossal Head 10; see chapter 12) in May 1994 stimulated additional interest in a new community museum project. If the magnificent Tiburcio head was to stay in Tenochtitlán, the villagers needed to demonstrate to the state government authorities that they could display and care for it properly. The museum thus became a common goal of both the SLTAP and the villagers of Tenochtitlán, and they worked together on the project. Members and friends of the SLTAP began raising funds, and villagers volunteered their labor to the task. Nevertheless, the museum's construction faced significant difficulties. Most construction materials had to be pur-



Fig. 16.4. The Tenochtitlán Community Museum, constructed jointly by the villagers of Tenochtitlán and the San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project. Colossal Head 10 sits prominently in the covered central patio. Photo courtesy of Ann Cyphers.

chased in towns two hours away and transported to Tenochtitlán. In the absence of running water at the construction site, the countless barrels of water needed to make concrete had to be hauled from the river in the back of the SLTAP's truck. However, bit by bit the museum became a reality.

The Tenochtitlán Community Museum was finished and inaugurated in 1995 (fig. 16.4). All of the stone monuments brought to light by the SLTAP have remained in Tenochtitlán and are now displayed in the museum. Tiburcio is prominently positioned in the museum's covered central patio, while the interior rooms house the smaller stone carvings, including some unearthed by Coe's Río Chiquito Project. The inauguration was a major event in the region. It was attended by the governor of the state of Veracruz and the rector of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), as well as many past workers from the SLTAP, local politicians, and a large contingent of villagers from Tenochtitlán and surrounding communities. Although the museum is clearly in an out-of-the-way locale, it nevertheless attracts a great deal of national and international tourism, in addition to visitors from the surrounding area. Ann Cyphers kept her promise to the community.

CHAPTER 17

The Night the Lights Went Out (2001)

Three years before the San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project began, an important discovery was made at the nearby Loma del Zapote. Farmers were preparing land for planting at an area of the *loma* known as El Azuzul when their metal tools struck stone. In a region devoid of natural hard stone, the men immediately realized that they had probably found something valuable, an Olmec monument. Under the right conditions, such a discovery could mean cash for them. They began digging excitedly and within minutes had exposed not just one, but three well-preserved stone sculptures. News of such finds somehow travels fast in that region, and their discovery quickly came to the attention of the INAH guards at San Lorenzo. The guards notified INAH officials in Veracruz city, and archaeologists were dispatched to take control of the El Azuzul find and excavate it professionally.

The INAH archaeologists discovered that although the three sculptures were lying on their sides, they seemed to have been positioned just as they had been displayed there three thousand years ago. Two of the carvings, situated one behind the other, represent seated humans with arms outstretched downward and grasping bar-like objects. A similar pose is found in the San Martín Pajapan monument (chapters 2, 8). The two humans are so nearly identical that they have become known as the El Azuzul twins. The third carving, a small feline (jaguar?), was positioned in front of the “twins,” but facing them. The three carvings are significant not only because they are beautiful but also because they provide indisputable evidence that some Olmec sculptures were erected in group “scenes” or tableaux.

My first opportunity to see the El Azuzul carvings came in 1990. Susan Gillespie and I were in Veracruz preparing for our 1991 proj-



Fig. 17.1. El Azul, 1990. The thatched hut on the hillside was built to protect three Olmec carvings. It also served as a schoolhouse. Photo by the author.

ect (chapter 15), and we had driven our pickup truck to San Lorenzo to visit Ann Cyphers and see the results of her project's first year of research. We were also eager to see the El Azul sculptures. Since the site was only 3 mi. (5 km) away and accessible by dirt road, we dedicated one morning of our visit to that side trip. As we prepared to depart the SLTAP encampment, Ann came over to wish us a good trip and also to give us a semi-serious warning: "A large number of federal police trucks have recently passed through Tenochtitlán, and those police are somewhere around El Azul. Be careful! But if they should arrest you today, don't worry. I know a good lawyer in Coatzacoalcos who can get you out of jail there tomorrow." That last statement offered us little comfort.

Although we did see several police vehicles during our drive along the dirt road, we arrived at El Azul without incident. Ann had informed us that the three carvings were located on the low hillside there, where they were protected by a thatched hut constructed by INAH (fig. 17.1). Upon arrival we parked our pickup truck and climbed the hill to the hut, only to discover that at that moment it was serving as the local schoolhouse, and school was in session. The teacher and amused students invited us in, and there were the stunning carvings! Because

the structure also functioned as a pigsty at night, the floor of the hut-schoolroom-sty was spotted with pig droppings. It was an interesting scene: the lovely sculptures, the giggling schoolchildren, and the messy floor.

The “twins,” each about 40 in. (1 m) tall, were sparkling white, and if I hadn’t known better, I would have suspected that they were newly made (fig. 17.2). They were indeed nearly identical except for a scar on

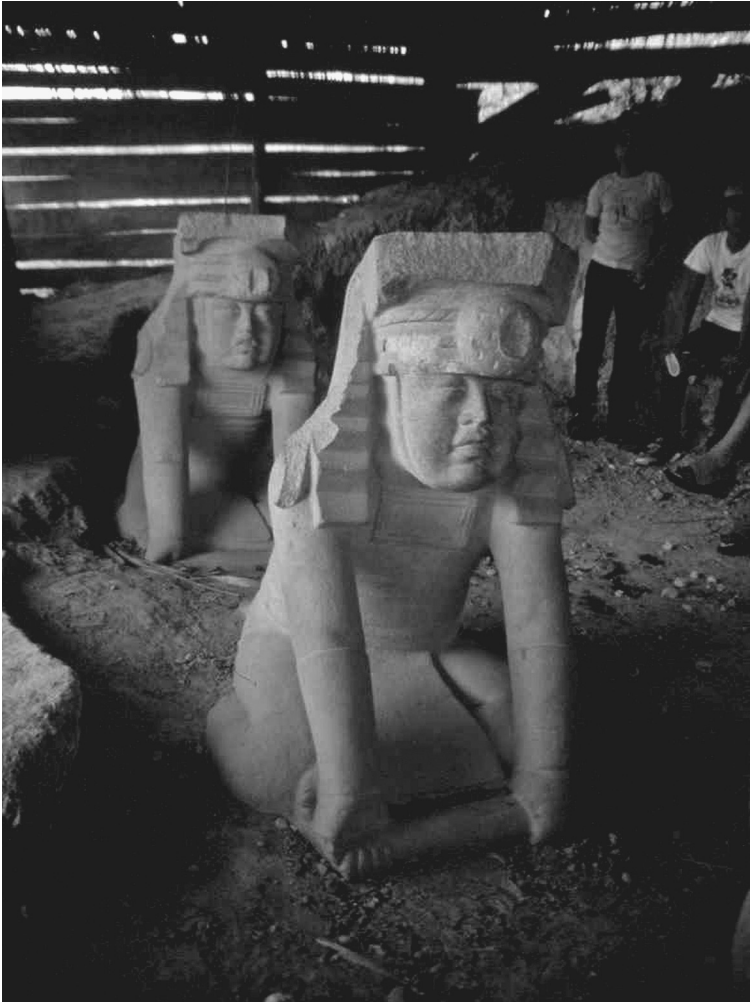


Fig. 17.2. El Azuzul. The two nearly identical carved anthropomorphic figures. Photo by the author.

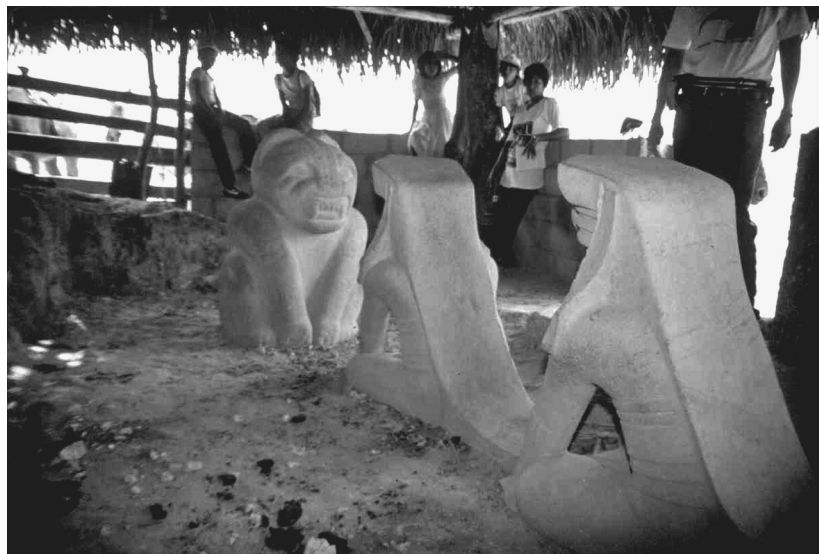


Fig. 17.3. The two El Azuzul figures were positioned facing a large feline. An even larger feline was later uncovered by excavations outside of the hut. Photo by the author.

the face of one of the twins—the result of a wayward bullet fired during a recent disagreement at El Azuzul. The feline, 47 in. (1.2 m) tall, was stiffer in appearance, less naturalistic, and not as aesthetically pleasing (fig. 17.3). However, a study by Ann Cyphers indicates that the feline statue had been recarved from an earlier monument, which apparently constricted its form.

As we finished our visit and started our walk back down the hill toward our truck, a large convoy of federal police pickup trucks came into view, heading northward along the dirt road toward San Lorenzo and the village of Tenochtitlán. The back of each truck contained six to eight men, all with submachine guns pointed skyward. Remembering Ann's words earlier that morning, we waved to them and tried to appear like tourists. The drivers honked their horns as they sped by, the armed riders hooted greetings, and the convoy departed El Azuzul in a cloud of dust. A few minutes later we followed in their dusty wake and returned to the SLTAP encampment.

Two years later, in 1992, the local political strongman (*cacique*) of the El Azuzul region invited Ann Cyphers to carry out excavations there. Previously, he had been openly antagonistic to her research at San Lo-

renzo and had frequently used his political influence to cause problems for her (e.g., the rumor mentioned in chapter 12 that she had stolen a colossal head). Ann surmised that his momentary friendly gesture may have arisen from his hope that SLTAP excavations would find additional sculptures and enhance his local prestige. In spite of the problems the *cacique* had been causing, Ann accepted his offer, for it provided an opportunity to obtain archaeological data on the site. It turned out that both parties got what they wanted.

The SLTAP did obtain useful archaeological information. On the hillside a few meters outside of the hut housing the statues (and pigs), their excavations uncovered a second and much larger stone feline, 65 in. (1.65 m) tall. Importantly, it was in alignment with the previously discovered carvings. The tableau was now understood to consist of two identical humans and a large and a small feline.

The Olmec sculpture museum in Tenochtitlán opened in 1995 (chapter 16). Subsequently, some villagers in Tenochtitlán expressed concern that the nearby El Azuzul carvings might be taken away to a state or national museum. They recommended moving the four sculptures to the museum in Tenochtitlán for their protection. However, that idea was strongly opposed by the *cacique*, who apparently hoped that a similar museum could be built at El Azuzul and attract tourists and businesses.

Neither side got its way. On the night of October 25, 2001, a widespread power blackout shrouded that region of southern Veracruz in darkness. Hours later, when power was finally restored and the lights came back on, the four heavy, bulky El Azuzul sculptures had somehow vanished from the hillside hut. A few days later they appeared in the Olmec sculpture gallery at the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa.

The strange event raises many questions. The removal of the four heavy carvings required planning, laborers, trucks, crates, and time to pack and load the sculptures. How did all that activity go apparently unnoticed? And could the regional power blackout that masked those activities have merely been a coincidence?

The concerns expressed by villagers in Tenochtitlán over the safety of the El Azuzul carvings had been well founded. Once again a rural Olmec archaeological site had been “mined” for its carved monuments. Soon thereafter, the village of Tenochtitlán received a letter from the state offering to erect another school building there.

CHAPTER 18

Some Thoughts on the Archaeology of the Olmecs

How the Search Unfolded

When Matthew Stirling began his research at Tres Zapotes in 1939, almost nothing was known about the archaeological culture we today call the Olmecs. Stirling's investigations there were pioneering, but unfortunately most of his discoveries—including the oldest Long Count date then known—were post-Olmec in time. However, the Tres Zapotes results did not dampen his enthusiasm or curiosity about the Olmecs, and he very quickly turned his attention to the site of La Venta. Thanks to his colleague Phil Drucker's somewhat arbitrary yet quite fortuitous decision to spend the final three weeks of the initial field season there excavating on the north side of La Venta's great earthen pyramid mound, the investigations "struck it rich." The stone tomb constructed of columnar basalt, the carved stone monuments, the crocodilian sandstone sarcophagus, the richly adorned (pseudo-) burials, and the caches of jade celts that they unearthed were spectacular. No Olmec dig since then has uncovered so many large and indisputable treasures in such a short time.

Furthermore, in the absence of any similar finds over the next few decades, the La Venta Complex A discoveries of 1942 and 1943—enhanced by Drucker, Heizer, and Squier's work there in 1955—became the standard vision of what the Olmec "phenomenon" was and its position in time and space. The word "Olmecs" conjured up magnificent stone monuments, jade objects, and massive offerings buried in great ritual activities. We now recognize that this is an exaggerated and unbalanced view, but nonetheless it is a vision that still influences some interpretations today.

Missing from that early research were meaningful data on the Olmecs as people, instead of just on carved stone monuments and elite ar-

tifacts. Although Drucker and Heizer speculated about Olmec agricultural systems and how the Olmecs might have amassed the human labor necessary to move multi-ton stone monuments, empirical information on Olmec society was lacking. Such knowledge did not begin to emerge until the investigations at San Lorenzo by the Río Chiquito Project and the subsequent San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project. In fact, San Lorenzo and the nearby sites studied by those projects have provided nearly the entirety of our information today regarding the Olmecs' houses, subsistence and economic practices, and regional political organization.

This final chapter provides some general thoughts on various aspects of the Olmecs' world. Topics covered include Olman and its regional centers, what we know about the origins of the Olmecs and their lifeways, and some facts and fantasies about their monuments. It concludes with some comments about the so-called Olmec demise.

Olman's Centers and Peripheries

The distinctive stone monuments created by the Olmecs have always been the major artifact type used by archaeologists to approximate the extent of the Olmecs' domain, Olman. In basic terms, Olman is the area of Mexico's southern Gulf coast where Olmec stone monuments occur. The reason, of course, is that unlike decorated pottery, figurines, or polished stone celts, Olmec stone monuments are large and very heavy, and thus they can't be readily traded to peoples in other areas of Mesoamerica. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that by 800 BC, a few non-Olmec centers elsewhere in Mesoamerica had adopted the *idea* and *technology* of monument-making and begun to create their own Olmec-like monuments. However, because those stone carvings occur at great distances from the Gulf coast and were apparently created by non-Olmec peoples using local stone, they are logically excluded from defining the geographical region of Olman.

The Olmec stone monuments at Tres Zapotes delimit the northwestern extent of Olman, while the monuments of La Venta, 120 mi. (200 km) away, demarcate the easternmost. The other major settlements with stone monuments, such as San Lorenzo, Laguna de los Cerros, and approximately a dozen smaller sites, occur within a relatively narrow band of land that forms an arc around the southern flank of the Tuxtla Mountains (see fig. 1.1).

While the waters of the Gulf of Mexico easily delimit the northern

edge of Olman, the remainder of its perimeter is difficult to determine with any certainty. Although the southernmost extent of monuments is found at San Lorenzo and its nearby secondary centers, there was undoubtedly a rural hinterland that extended further outward. It would have been a hinterland characterized by farming and fishing hamlets comprised of simple thatched huts, and lacking any stone carvings. By their very nature such settlements are far more “invisible” to archaeologists. The Tuxtla Mountains of northern Olman fall within that hinterland category, but how far such hinterlands extend beyond San Lorenzo, La Venta, or Tres Zapotes is unknown. Because the size of the rural hinterland probably depended upon each locale’s ecology and natural resources, its extent would have varied from center to center and would have fluctuated over time.

Archaeologists usually characterize four Olmec sites within Olman as having been major Olmec centers. They do so based upon site size, architectural complexity, and the quantity and quality of the stone monuments. On the basis of those criteria, two sites particularly stand out: San Lorenzo and La Venta. La Venta has four colossal stone heads, four tabletop altar-thrones, and over eighty other stone carvings. Among the more than 120 carvings cataloged at San Lorenzo are ten colossal heads and two altar-thrones. Both of these sites are situated in major lowland river basins in eastern Olman.

Laguna de los Cerros and Tres Zapotes, in western Olman, are also usually considered to have been major centers. However, while the exact number of Olmec monuments at each of those sites is open to debate (in part because some carvings may be post-Olmec), it is clear that both centers have significantly fewer stone monuments than their two eastern counterparts, even though they are closer to the basalt stone sources. Laguna de los Cerros has perhaps two dozen carved stones, including several small altar-thrones, but it lacks any colossal stone heads. In contrast, the seven or eight probable Olmec carvings at Tres Zapotes include two colossal stone heads but no known altar-thrones. The dozen or so sites in Olman with only a few monuments each, such as La Isla, Los Soldados, Estero Rabón, and Loma del Zapote, had enough “status” to warrant a few carvings, and thus may have been secondary centers to a nearby primary center.

San Lorenzo and La Venta also seem to have been larger and more complex than the western centers of Laguna de los Cerros and Tres Zapotes. In terms of ecological setting, those eastern centers were riverine, while the two western centers developed and flourished in tropical up-

land valleys on the lower slopes of the Tuxtla Mountains, somewhat distant from any large rivers. Does that mean that the major developments and activities of the Olmecs took place principally in the riverine basin areas of eastern Olman? The lack of comparable research at the four centers means that the question cannot be answered yet.

Furthermore, the present archaeological data indicate that those four sites did not reach their zeniths at the same time. San Lorenzo's apogee occurred c. 1150–900 BC, after which its power waned, perhaps due to major geomorphological changes in the regional river systems. La Venta, on the other hand, appears to have reached its zenith c. 900–400 BC, although whether or how its rise in importance is related to San Lorenzo's decline is presently unknown. Finally, although both Laguna de los Cerros and Tres Zapotes may have been settled by 1150 BC, it is possible that they did not reach their maximum importance until sometime between 900 and 400 BC, when La Venta was dominant.

The Question of Olmec Origins

One of the first puzzles to concern Matthew Stirling, Phil Drucker, and other investigators was where the Olmecs fit within the timetable of Mesoamerican prehistory. Today, fifty years of accumulated radiocarbon dates enable us to answer that question: c. 1150–400 BC. However, because neither archaeological stratigraphy nor radiocarbon dates are entirely precise, the beginning and ending dates for the Olmecs will always be somewhat fuzzy, and interpretations will be influenced by subjective decisions. Because of that imprecision, popular media sources can still grab our attention by making a mystery out of Olmec origins or the alleged later “collapse” of the Olmecs. But what do the current archaeological data tell us?

During the decades when La Venta's Complex A provided nearly all of the excavation data on the Olmecs, the puzzle of their origins was perhaps understandable. In the lower levels of their excavations of Complex A the archaeologists found no artifacts that looked ancestral to the fabulous discoveries they had made. That caused some serious scholars to seek the Olmecs' origins in other, better known, regions of Mesoamerica, and a few to suggest more exotic origins via contacts from Asia, Africa, or the Near East.

However, most of those notions faded quickly among professional archaeologists when Coe and Diehl's San Lorenzo excavations revealed

a pre-Olmec stratigraphic sequence that had been lacking at La Venta. Their discovery demonstrated that people had not “appeared suddenly” in the region, but had been there for centuries. Furthermore, there were no sudden or extraordinary changes in artifact categories in the sequence that might indicate an intrusion of peoples from outside of the region, near or far. The pre-Olmec-to-Olmec stratigraphic sequence has been verified by Ann Cyphers’s more recent research at San Lorenzo. The ancestral roots of the Olmecs lie in the tropical landscape of Mexico’s southern Gulf coast.

A frequently asked question is, when in that sequence at San Lorenzo did the people inhabiting the foothills and plateau “become Olmecs?” In essence that question is the equivalent to asking, “When does an adolescent become an adult?”—a question that has never had an easy answer. In “pre-Olmec” San Lorenzo, the various pottery vessels and clay figurine types that scholars identify as “Olmec” do not show up simultaneously in the stratigraphic record, but instead appear individually, trait by trait, over a time span of several hundred years. That evidence informs us that in their material culture the inhabitants of the San Lorenzo plateau were slowly transforming into what archaeologists call “the Olmecs.” In the archaeological literature, 1150 BC is the standard starting date for the Olmecs. Yet what is important is not exactly when the black line separating “pre-Olmec” and “Olmec” is drawn on an archaeologist’s chronological chart, but the fact that the sequence provides strong evidence that the area’s pre-Olmec population gradually changed into the society we today call the Olmecs.

Lifeways

The present archaeological data suggest that Olmec society was hierarchical and composed of some high-ranking individuals (elites) and low-ranking persons (commoners), although the difference between those categories may have been one of gradation rather than sharply defined social classes. Houses on the San Lorenzo plateau built atop low raised platforms seem to have been dwellings of the elite, whereas the more numerous and simpler ground-level wattle-and-daub houses with tamped earth floors are interpreted as non-elite. In addition, jewelry made from imported exotic materials such as greenstone beads and earspools, as well as small polished iron ore mirrors, are considered to be elite objects because of their rarity and craftsmanship. Significantly, such objects are usually found associated with the more complex elite dwellings.

The differences in housing types and ornamentation seen at San Lorenzo would have been present as well at La Venta and other Olmec primary and secondary centers. Indeed, those status distinctions as expressed in material culture were not exclusive to the Olmecs but were also typical of non-Olmec Preclassic period societies throughout much of Mesoamerica.

Most scholars concur that the colossal stone heads and the personages shown seated within the niches of altar-thrones are representations of a center's ruler (paramount personage). However, we have virtually no information on rulers and rulership other than what we interpret from those stone monuments and rare structures like the Red Palace at San Lorenzo. Defining a paramount's actual roles, duties, and relationships to the rest of the populace is extremely difficult, and, unfortunately, prone to subjective interpretations and inadequate nomenclature. Olmec paramounts have been variously termed "rulers" (as I do here), "shamanic leaders," "chiefs," "big men," and "kings." However, none of those terms may accurately describe the actual nature of Olmec paramounts. Furthermore, it was a position whose characteristics undoubtedly evolved during the span of the Olmecs' history, and may likewise have varied somewhat at each Olmec center.

In terms of subsistence activities, the vast majority of the population, the non-elites, were undoubtedly horticulturalists whose main activity throughout their lives was to clear the tropical forests, plant the clearings in corn, beans, squash, and manioc, and maintain those *milpas*. Many were probably multi-taskers in the sense that they also foraged to obtain aquatic resources from the rivers, swamps, and estuaries, and hunted and gathered throughout the countryside to supplement their diet.

Although up until a few decades ago it was presumed that the rise of the Olmecs' complex society, as elsewhere in Mesoamerica, was strongly related to the development of a maize-based (*Zea mays*) economy, that scenario has lost support. The most recent evidence tells us that while corn was certainly cultivated in Olman even in pre-Olmec times, it did not become a major staple in the Olmec diet until perhaps after 900 BC. Thus corn likely had a more significant role in the diet of Middle Preclassic Olmecs at sites such as La Venta and Tres Zapotes than it did for their Early Preclassic predecessors at San Lorenzo.

Daily life for every Olmec family required the use of a variety of tools, implements, and pottery vessels. In most instances, the villages and hamlets would have been relatively self-sufficient, locally producing a number of those objects. However, many raw materials are not

evenly distributed in Olman. For example, the basalt from which domestic grinding stones were fashioned occurs primarily in the Tuxtla Mountains of western Olman. The two centers closest to the Tuxtla, Laguna de los Cerros and Tres Zapotes, may have been involved in the acquisition and trade of basalt to the riverine-oriented eastern centers. Basalt workshop areas where grinding stones were produced have been identified at La Venta and San Lorenzo near elite structures in the main site area, suggesting that the manufacture of these needed implements was under elite control.

An unusual artifact of Olmec daily life that was also a commodity for regional and long-distance exchange is just now gaining attention and investigation: *chapapote* (bitumen, tar). Bitumen seeps occur in many lowland areas of eastern Olman, including near both San Lorenzo and La Venta. The presence of *chapapote* in that area was even mentioned by the sixteenth-century Spanish chronicler Bernardino de Sahagún. In the twentieth century bitumen seeps served to attract oil geologists to the region and probably indirectly stimulated the early geological explorations of the La Venta area that Stirling witnessed. The Río Chiquito Project's excavations found *chapapote* "in abundance" at San Lorenzo, and the more recent SLTAP excavations recovered thousands of small chunks and small spheres from many different contexts there. *Chapapote* fragments are particularly abundant at San Lorenzo period Olmec hamlets and villages along the rivers. For example, excavations at the site of Paso los Ortices, near San Lorenzo, uncovered a storage pit filled with c. 550 pounds (250 kg) of *chapapote* slabs.

Archaeological evidence also indicates that the Olmecs processed bitumen collected from seeps by combining it with an additive such as sand and heating the mixture in ceramic vessels. The Olmecs seem to have utilized *chapapote* for waterproofing canoes, as a sealant between the U-shaped stones in their aqueduct systems, and sometimes for surfacing the floors of their houses. In addition, two stone knives found in the El Manatí excavations had handles created from *chapapote*. Clearly, *chapapote* was important to the Olmecs.

Although Olman was rich in some raw materials, the Olmecs had to obtain various other needed or desired commodities from outside their domain via the long-distance interregional trade networks that were functioning across much of Mesoamerica. An example of such an imported commodity, discussed in chapter 16, is the ilmenite that was used to create the enigmatic multi-drilled cubes. Another highly significant imported commodity was obsidian (volcanic glass), a material utilized

throughout Mesoamerica for creating basic cutting tools. Because the chemical trace elements in obsidian are slightly different at each obsidian source, the origin sources of the obsidian used to make cutting tools at a site can usually be determined. From such analyses we can infer that the obsidian used by the Olmecs at San Lorenzo came from sources in two distant and distinct regions of Mesoamerica, the volcanic highlands of Guatemala and those of Central Mexico.

Perhaps the most famous exotic product brought into Olman via long-distance exchange networks was high-quality greenstone. A variety of hard stones with a greenish hue fall within that category (e.g., jadeite, serpentine), but Matt Stirling and many other archaeologists have often simply referred to them generically as “jade.” The Olmec elite used jade jewelry as a status symbol. Jade was also crafted into figurines (such as those found at La Venta; e.g., fig. 7.5) and celts (such as those found at La Venta and El Manatí; e.g., fig. 13.5).

The magnificent finds of jade celts and figurines made by Stirling and Drucker in their excavations in La Venta Complex A in 1942 apparently caused many scholars to think of jade objects as an Olmec trait, and the presence of such objects among other Preclassic period Mesoamerican societies as evidence of “Olmec influences.” The validity of both of those assumptions is doubtful. Jade was in use in some non-Olmec areas of Mesoamerica as early or earlier than it was in Olman. Furthermore, there are no sources of jadeite or serpentine in Olman, so it was an import to that region. Therefore, it is possible that some or many of the jade objects found at sites such as La Venta and El Manatí were actually manufactured outside of Olman by non-Olmec craftsmen at centers near serpentine or jadeite sources, and subsequently imported into the Olmec domain.

As these valuable commodities made their way into Olman, it is likely that they were exchanged for Gulf coast resources. Unfortunately the present archaeological record provides little data on the types of raw materials or finished products of Olmec origin that were traded or exchanged with peoples in other regions. Nevertheless, strong possibilities include cacao beans (chocolate), animal skins, bird feathers, salt, marine conch shells for trumpets and marine shells for making jewelry, stingray spines for ritual bloodletting, and of course, *chapaote*. Furthermore, the rubber balls preserved in the mud at El Manatí remind us that such balls could likewise have been an item of exchange.

The rubber balls recovered at El Manatí are, of course, suggestive evidence that the Olmecs played a rubber ball game (see figs. 13.2, 13.5).

That should not be surprising, for ball games of one type or another were apparently relatively common throughout the ancient Americas, and they almost certainly have an antiquity that greatly predates the Olmecs. In addition, many of the native American ball games were not played in formal ball courts. That might also have been true of the ball games played by the Olmecs.

The Olmecs' Stone Monuments

Most Olmec stone monuments fall into one of four general categories: colossal heads, tabletop altar-thrones, stelae, and three-dimensional statuary. Today in museum contexts those monuments are usually displayed as impressive single works of art. Some may have had a similar commanding presence when originally erected and displayed at Olmec centers, where one of their functions was to communicate certain visual and ideological messages to their viewers. Individuals who beheld these carvings would have been the inhabitants of those centers as well as visitors from around Olman. Visitors may have traveled to the regional centers on pilgrimages or for ritual or commercial purposes.

Colossal heads, among the most impressive of the Olmecs' stone monuments, vary in size. As mentioned in prior chapters, the two Tres Zapotes heads are the smallest, each measuring 4.8 ft. (1.47 m) in height, while in contrast Head 1 at San Lorenzo is 9.3 ft. (2.8 m) tall, and the unusual Cobata head is over 11 ft. (3.4 m) in height. The realistic and distinctive facial features of each colossal head (excepting the Cobata head) make it likely that they are "portrait" depictions of specific personages, most probably individual Olmec rulers—either as living rulers or as revered ancestors. A helmet-like headdress is characteristic of each head, but most of them are adorned with a distinctive motif that probably served as an identifying emblem for the ruler being portrayed.

The helmet-looking headdresses have been the subject of comment and speculation for decades. For example, it has been suggested that they were leather head coverings that were worn by players of the rubber ball game. Furthermore, imaginative reconstructive drawings of Olmec scenes in popular magazines often contain representations of people wearing such helmets. However, that form of headdress may never have been worn at all by any of the Olmecs! A more pragmatic explanation has been proposed by archaeologist Susan Gillespie. She points out

that when Olmec personages are depicted in two-dimensional low-relief carvings, they are never shown with helmet-like headdresses but more often wear hats with projecting brims (see e.g., fig. 4.2). However, for the Olmec sculptors working to fashion a three-dimensional stone colossal head, a wide projecting hat brim would have been nearly impossible to create in terms of labor or even in their ability to find a stone of the appropriate diameter. Furthermore, the resulting carved head would have been top heavy and difficult to maneuver. Wide hat brims also would have obscured the faces, which are the most compelling features of the heads. Susan Gillespie suggests that the Olmecs' artistic solution to the brim problem was simply to reduce all prominent headdress features to low relief, maintaining high relief in the carving only for the personage's facial features. With the hat brims merely implied, the hats take on the appearance of helmets.

Like the colossal heads, altar-thrones vary in size. The largest, San Lorenzo Monument 14, is 6 ft. (1.8 m) high, 13.7 ft. (4.2 m) long, and 5 ft. (1.5 m) wide, while two badly broken examples from Laguna de los Cerros (Mon. 5 and 28) are each less than half that height. The symbolism communicated by the altar-throne is relatively clear. The tabletop-like upper ledges are often decorated with U-bracket (crocodilian) mandible motifs, representing the earth's surface. The front face of the altar-throne, beneath the projecting "earth" ledge, contains a large niche that is symbolically the mouth of a cave. For most ancient Mesoamericans, caves were sacred places. They were seen as entrances to the underworld, the realm of venerated supernatural forces, including those related to rain and crop fertility. Seated within the altar-throne's niche is a personage—most likely the ruler, carved in high relief. The basic message communicated to the viewer by these altar-thrones is that the ruler (either living or ancestral) is the society's influential intermediary to the underworld realm of supernatural forces.

In the early literature on the Olmecs, these large rectangular carvings were called "altars," that is, tables for making offerings. They are now referred to as altar-thrones or simply thrones, and the change in terminology was due to a bit of research luck on my part. In 1968 a Mexican friend took me to see some unreported Olmec-like paintings at Oxtotitlán Cave in the mountains 90 mi. (150 km) inland from the Mexican tourist mecca of Acapulco, Guerrero. Those paintings included a large polychrome cliff-face mural depicting a richly dressed personage seated upon an object that was highly reminiscent of Gulf coast Olmec

altars. That 700 BC painting suggested to me that the stone “altars” of Olman had literally been the thrones, the “seats of power,” of Olmec paramounts. I published that hypothesis in 1973, and the term “altar-throne” (or simply “throne”) for those carvings is now standard.

Interestingly, there are two major subtypes of thrones with niched personages, and they seem to occur as pairs at both La Venta and San Lorenzo. In one subtype the personage within the niche grasps ropes running along the base of the carving that lead to persons carved in bas-relief on the throne’s side panels. Matt Stirling believed that the persons shown on the side panels were prisoners bound by the ropes. On the other hand, I have theorized that the rope symbolizes the metaphoric Mesoamerican “rope of kinship” and proclaims kinship bonds between the individuals (paramounts) portrayed. Whichever interpretation is correct, those individuals on the front and sides are identified by their headdress insignias, and several are shown with prominent physical features.

An obvious question therefore is whether such identified personages are shown in more than one monument. San Lorenzo altar-throne Monument 14 (see fig. 6.1) provides an apparent match. Although its niched personage (ruler) is too eroded to be identified, the rope he holds in his left hand passes to a personage depicted in bas-relief on the side panel. That personage has prominent buck teeth and wears a brimmed hat, with a large and distinctive bird claw motif covering the hat’s crown. A different carving depicting what is likely the same individual, with a bird claw headdress motif and buck teeth, is Colossal Head 4 at the site of La Venta. Was the La Venta personage the kinsman or ancestor of the San Lorenzo ruler, or his prisoner? Unfortunately, we cannot answer that question. La Venta’s colossal heads were removed from their original context decades ago and cannot be securely dated.

The second major subtype of altar-throne depicts the personage seated in the niche holding a baby with supernatural features. The baby, with a cleft head, serrated ear ornaments, and other iconographic motifs, is hypothesized by some scholars to represent an Olmec corn god or to be associated in some manner with the rain and water essential for agriculture. La Venta’s Altar 5 (see fig. 4.1) is perhaps the best example of this subtype. In addition to the personage and ornamented baby in the frontal niche, the two side panels each have low-relief carvings depicting two naturalistic Olmec adults carrying squirming babies (see fig. 4.2). These four babies are different from the baby held by the in-

dividual in the niche. Two have bald, pear-shaped heads, such as those on the wooden busts recovered at El Manatí and the baby face clay figures found in Olman and other areas of Mesoamerica. The third baby has a cleft head. The features of the fourth baby were destroyed when the altar-throne was damaged by mutilation. Regrettably, the symbolic meaning of those four supernatural babies, along with their counterparts elsewhere in wood and clay, still remains to be satisfactorily researched and explained.

The corpus of Olmec stone monuments also includes a wide variety of three-dimensional stone statues carved in the round. These statues include well-sculpted “portrait” carvings of personages—seated, kneeling, or, more rarely, standing—as well as statues with anthropomorphic bodies but with feline-like supernatural visages. Some supernatural animal sculptures also occur. Unlike the multi-ton colossal heads and altar-thrones, the statuary was somewhat more portable, so it could be moved and re-erected many times. One of the important revelations resulting from the discovery of the in-situ group of statues at El Azuzul (chapter 17) was that the carvings were at times displayed in groups to create tableaux.

The fourth category of stone monuments, stelae—large, vertically erected stone slabs with low-relief carving—appear later in Olmec prehistory, perhaps not until after c. 800 BC, after which time they became the major medium for displaying low-relief images of personages and supernaturals. Stelae are not abundant in Olman, and most occur at La Venta. One of that center’s most commanding carvings is Stela 2, which is over 10 ft. (3 m) in height. Its low-relief carving depicts a standing personage in frontal view. He wears a cape and carries a scepter. Three smaller caped “flying” human figures in lively poses are shown on each side of this main personage. Blom and La Farge discovered Stela 2 in the large plaza immediately south of La Venta’s pyramid mound, and found Colossal Head 1 close by. Even though the colossal head may be several centuries older than the stela, iconographic evidence suggests to me that the proximity of the two carvings was purposeful rather than coincidental. The tall headdress worn by the ruler on Stela 2 includes two distinctive glyphs—the outcurved “sky fang” motif representing the realm of the ancestors, and above that a U motif with three pendant “claw” elements. That latter symbol is precisely the insignia in the headdress of Colossal Head 1. The Stela 2 paramount apparently had the insignia of what I believe to be his ancestor (the colossal head) placed in the

sculpted image of his own headdress, and likewise had his ancestor's colossal head positioned near his own portrait on Stela 2, perhaps to legitimize or reify his rule.

Monument Moving

Llano del Jícaro and other Olmec stone quarry sites were near the Tuxtla Mountains, at significant distances from San Lorenzo and La Venta. Because of that fact, scholars have long wondered how the Olmecs moved the roughed-out, multi-ton blocks of stone from the quarries to their final destinations. Were the stones transported overland or by river? As yet there is still no good answer to that question, but it is virtually impossible to go overland from the quarry sites to either La Venta or San Lorenzo without encountering rivers that must be crossed. The long-distance movement of stone and stone monuments therefore probably required a combination of both methods.

Even a combination of overland and riverine transport raises numerous questions. What size of watercraft would have been necessary, and how would the huge stones have been loaded on and off? Although the answers to those questions remain elusive, it is clear that the Olmecs had better luck in accomplishing riverine transport than a television production company that decided several years ago to re-create the carving and river transport of a colossal head. It turned out to be a fiasco for them, and presumably an expensive one at that. However, it was instructive to researchers.

The intended documentary began with a search in the Tuxtla Mountains for an appropriately sized basalt boulder. That was to be followed by engaging a modern sculptor to carve the boulder into a colossal head. However, at that second stage, their plans began to go awry. The boulder they selected was not freshly mined—which we presume was the case for the Olmecs—but had been standing exposed in the hot Veracruz sun for centuries. Thus the sculptor was unable to carve the time-hardened basalt with his modern *metal* tools, much less attempt it with stone tools. The filmmakers ultimately settled on the fall-back idea of simply filming the moving of the large, unaltered head-shaped boulder down to the river to replicate the task the Olmecs had frequently carried out.

However, as the cameras whirled, even that attempted re-creation

quickly bogged down. Eventually the television company was forced to hire a large truck and crane to move the boulder to a riverside destination. Unfortunately, that new location had its own set of problems, including the fact that the river's current was deemed too swift for managing the large wooden raft they intended to use to transport their boulder. Thus another compromise had to be made, and the scene of the launch was shifted to the smoother waters of a nearby lagoon.

The day of the launch arrived. The raft was floating in its moored position at the shore of the placid lagoon. The crane slowly lifted the large stone ersatz colossal head and gently lowered it onto the center of the raft—and under the weight of the boulder the large raft slowly sank down into the mud of the shallow lagoon and became stuck! Efforts were made to pole the raft out into the lagoon, but that did not work. They tried pushing it, but the raft still wouldn't budge. Finally the filmmakers reverted to the very non-Olmec method of attaching tow lines to the raft and using motorboats to try and pull it free. The mud still held it firmly. A final compromise was reached. As the cameras rolled, the production company members gathered beside the make-believe colossal head on the partially sunken raft and toasted the "success" of their venture with champagne. Their futile attempts tell us that the Olmecs unquestionably had better methods of moving monuments, even if we don't know precisely what they were.

We do, nevertheless, have hints as to how monuments transported by river might have been off-loaded. Ann Cyphers's SLTAP research identified raised causeways along the rivers that she believes may have functioned as docks or wharfs for canoe traffic. Furthermore, near the site of El Azuzul, the SLTAP found a wide inclined earthen ramp running up from the river. Arriving rafts carrying monuments could have been dragged up onto the ramp and then off-loaded. Do similar ramps and causeways remain to be detected at La Venta and along rivers near the Tuxtla Mountains quarry sites?

Finally, the discovery of an area at San Lorenzo where old monuments were being recycled and carved into new statuary (chapter 12) suggests that there may have been times when Olmec centers had difficulties obtaining stone from the distant quarries. Access to quarries may have been hampered during the regions' annual flooding, or perhaps there were periods of conflict within Olman that curtailed the availability of stone. Whatever the causes, the Olmecs apparently stockpiled old monuments, perhaps for just such occasions.

Monument Mutilation

The magnificent stone monumental art of the Olmecs is nearly always found purposely damaged. Heads and arms are usually missing from statues and massive fragments have been broken from altar-thrones. Only the colossal portrait heads of rulers are relatively untouched. Matt Stirling and many of the early scholars studying the Olmecs attributed the damage or “mutilation” to violent acts by invaders, iconoclasts, or even rebellious Olmecs. Based upon their San Lorenzo research, Coe and Diehl theorized that the mutilation and destruction of many of that site’s stone carvings was iconoclastic in nature and had taken place at the end of the San Lorenzo phase, about 900 BC.

That viewpoint has markedly changed in recent years as research has broadened our knowledge of the Olmecs. It is now apparent that the monuments were disfigured by the Olmecs themselves. In fact, monument mutilation was a practice that occurred repeatedly throughout the seven hundred years that the Olmecs created stone carvings. Both the oldest and the most recent monuments were mutilated. One of the most common forms of mutilation involved the decapitation of statuary. There is archaeological evidence indicating that an individual’s portrait or personal monuments may have been ritually “terminated” by such decapitation at the time of the person’s death, a form of funerary mutilation. In addition, Ann Cyphers’s San Lorenzo research has presented us with a mundane explanation for some (but not all) “mutilated” carvings—they were being recycled.

The largest of the monuments, the altar-thrones, are usually also the most mutilated. Huge sections have been broken from the corners of several thrones, a feat whose accomplishment required something akin to a prehistoric pile driver. Nevertheless, an insightful observation by art historian James Porter has provided evidence that even such massive damage may have had peaceful and practical purposes. While visiting the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa, Porter became perplexed by an unusual detail on two of the San Lorenzo colossal heads on display there. Colossal Heads 2 and 7 are finely carved, but both had unusual carved “arcs” behind their right ears that marred the otherwise flawless portraits. Porter also noticed that unlike many colossal heads, the backs of these two heads were unusually flat and featureless. As he gazed at the colossal heads and puzzled over the unusual arcs, the answer suddenly dawned on him. The two colossal heads had been sculpted from altar-thrones! The arcs were the remnants of the throne’s niche (on the orig-

inal front, now the side of the head), and the heads' flat backs had been the bases of the thrones.

The corners broken from at least some Olmec altar-thrones (see, e.g., fig. 4.1) were not the result of senseless mutilation, but were instead a step in reshaping the stone into the oval form of a head. It now seems likely that in certain instances, perhaps at a ruler's death, his throne was recarved to create a colossal head in his image, perhaps now as an ancestral figure. Although the two San Lorenzo carvings remain the only colossal heads demonstrated to have been recarved in that manner, they suggest something else to me. Perhaps colossal heads are the only un-mutilated category of Olmec monuments because they were posthumous creations and thus were not the target of funerary period "mutilation" activities.

Whatever Happened to the Olmecs?

As pointed out at the beginning of this book, the Olmecs are an archaeological culture. Therefore, their "beginning" and "ending" dates have been assigned by archaeologists. The final date given for the Olmecs, c. 400 BC, is merely the youngest date obtained from La Venta's Complex A. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the cessation of ritual activities in Complex A, one small area of the La Venta site, represented the final stage of occupation of La Venta itself or of the entire region of Olman.

I frequently see it stated that the Olmecs "collapsed," but that is unsupported speculation. There is a significant knowledge gap in Olman from c. 500 to 300 BC, and we simply don't know what happened during those two centuries. Of course it is possible that the Olmecs "collapsed" or "died out" during that period, but there are also other possibilities to consider. We must go back to the fact that as an archaeological culture, the Olmecs are identified by a set of definitive traits, such as their stone monuments and certain pottery types and figurines. We can see in the archaeological record that over the centuries those "defining" characteristics gradually evolved and changed into new and different material features and social symbols.

Over the centuries, with those changes, the Olmecs may have simply evolved away from their defining traits, from their "Olmecness." This supposition does not mean that there were not environmental or geomorphological changes that negatively impacted certain centers or re-

gions of Olman; nevertheless, there is also evidence that such an evolution out of “being Olmecs” took place. The center of Tres Zapotes, in northern Olman, did not collapse or die out but continued to be occupied after 400 BC. It maintained a monument tradition—such as Stela C, discovered by Matt Stirling—that clearly had strong and visible Olmec roots.

The Olmecs initiated the concept of creating stone sculptures, thus sowing the seeds of a major Mesoamerican art tradition that became widespread and remained highly significant up to the arrival of the Spanish in the Americas 2700 years later. That is their greatest and most visible legacy. That Olmec heritage is most apparent in the tropical lowlands of southern Mesoamerica in the Classic period Maya use of stone monuments and Long Count dates to commemorate rulership. In that sense, then, the Olmecs can perhaps be considered a grandparent to developments in the Maya region. In contrast, any legacy to the societies of Central Mexico is much less apparent. Stone monuments were generally eschewed and rulership was more “anonymous” in the great Classic and Postclassic period cities of that highland area, such as Teotihuacan, Xochicalco, Cholula, and Tula. Any Olmec legacy there was indirect and distant.

Some Final Thoughts

The study of the Olmecs has come a long way since the travels of Blom and La Farge and the pioneering excavations by Matt Stirling and his colleagues. However, the Olman area is changing quickly, too. Populations are increasing, towns are becoming cities, ranching activities are expanding at the expense of tropical forests, and paved roads now penetrate into previously remote areas. In many instances such modernization will undoubtedly lead to the damage or destruction of archaeological sites. That is true not only in the Olman area, but also around the world.

Nonetheless, I realize that modernization will at times actually benefit our knowledge of the Olmecs by bringing previously unknown Olmec sites to light, by providing researchers with easier access to those sites, and by the development of new high-tech equipment that will provide archaeologists with new types of data on the past. I hope so, because there are still so many intriguing questions about the Olmecs remaining to be answered.

Bibliographic Essay

Chapter 1. The Olmecs Come to Light

The *National Geographic Magazine* articles authored by Matt Stirling and illustrated with photographs by Richard Stewart present a mixture of travelogue and archaeology. The 1940 article “Great Stone Faces of the Mexican Jungle,” *National Geographic Magazine* 78:309–334, comments on Stirling’s project at Tres Zapotes and Matt and Marion’s first visit to La Venta. The couple co-authored the 1942 article “Finding Jewels of Jade in a Mexican Swamp,” *National Geographic Magazine* 82(5):635–661, which deals with some of the significant finds made at La Venta in 1942 but also mentions the Maya site of Palenque. A 1943 article by Matt, “La Venta’s Green Stone Tigers,” *National Geographic Magazine* 80:321–332, draws again from the La Venta excavations but also adds a search inland for a rumored “lost city.” His 1947 article “On the Trail of La Venta Man,” *National Geographic Magazine* 91:137–172, primarily discusses travel and research in Chiapas, but ends with a description of the Stirlings’ initial visit to San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán and their 1946 project at that site.

For the sake of consistency throughout this book I use the date ranges for the Olmecs that resulted from Michael Coe and Richard Diehl’s research at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, discussed in chapter 9: 1150–400 BC.

The Aztecs’ description of their contemporaries, including the people they called “Olmeca,” is found in book 10—“The People”—of *The Florentine Codex: The General History of the Things of New Spain*, translated by A. Anderson and C. Dibble, School of American Research and University of Utah, Santa Fe (1961).

Chapter 2. The Tulane Expedition and the Olmec World (1925–1926)

An account of the Tulane expedition was published by Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge in the two-volume book *Tribes and Temples*, Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, New Orleans (1926–1927). The informa-

tion on their journey in the Tuxtla Mountains and their discoveries at La Venta is found in volume 1, pages 15–92.

Many scholars doubt that Bernal Díaz del Castillo actually participated in all of the events that he mentions in his chronicle of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Nonetheless, his account is very interesting and is available in English and Spanish under a variety of titles, such as *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, Da Capo Press, New York (2004); *The Conquest of New Spain*, Penguin Classics, New York (1963); and *The History of the Conquest of New Spain*, by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, edited and introduced by David Carrasco, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque (2009).

Chapter 3. The First Excavations: Tres Zapotes (1938–1940)

A very good summary of Matt Stirling's research and accomplishments is found in Michael Coe's obituary of Stirling, "Matthew Williams Stirling, 1896–1975," *American Antiquity* 41:67–70 (1976). It is likewise an excellent tribute to the man many of us consider to have been the father of Olmec archaeology. The obituary was reprinted in the *The Olmec and Their Neighbors: Essays in Memory of Matthew W. Stirling*, edited by E. Benson, pp. ix–xii, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC (1981).

Accounts of Matt's research at Tres Zapotes appear in his articles "Discovering the New World's Oldest Dated Work of Man," *National Geographic Magazine* 76:183–219 (1939), and "Great Stone Faces of the Mexican Jungle," *National Geographic Magazine* 78:309–334 (1940). Matt's personal recollections of his archaeological career are published in "Early History of the Olmec Problem," *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec*, edited by E. Benson, pp. 1–8, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC (1968). A number of the incidents at Tres Zapotes are recounted by Marion Stirling in "An Intimate View of Archaeological Exploration," in *The Olmec and Their Neighbors*, edited by E. Benson, pp. 1–13, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC (1981). Marion Stirling also published an entertaining general account of camp life at several sites in "Jungle House-keeping for a Geographic Expedition," *National Geographic Magazine* 80:303–327 (1941). In addition, some tales in this chapter were personally told to me by the Stirlings.

A very good summary of Philip Drucker's interesting and varied career can be found in the obituary written by Margaret Lantis, one of his colleagues at the University of Kentucky: "Philip Drucker, 1911–1982," *American Anthropologist* 85:897–902 (1983).

The monuments uncovered at Tres Zapotes are reported in M. Stirling's *Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 138, Smithsonian Institution (1943). Among them is the misidentified "owl," Monument H (but mislabeled in Plate 11a as Mon. L), and Monument M (Plates 11b–d). That monograph also describes stone carvings at La Venta, as well as the non-Olmec sites of Cerro de las Mesas, Veracruz, and Izapa, Chiapas. Tres Zapotes Stela C and its Maya-like Long Count are discussed in M. Stirling, "Discovering the New World's Oldest Dated Work of Man," and in the publi-

cation “An Initial Series from Tres Zapotes, Vera Cruz, Mexico” *National Geographic Society Contributed Technical Papers* 1 (1940). The excavations and ceramics are discussed by C. Weiant in *An Introduction to the Ceramics of Tres Zapotes*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 139, Smithsonian Institution (1943), and in P. Drucker’s *Ceramic Sequences at Tres Zapotes, Veracruz, Mexico*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 140, Smithsonian Institution (1943).

The recent recognition that a stone statue head on display in the Amparo Museum in Puebla, Mexico, is the long-missing head of Tres Zapotes Monument M is briefly discussed by C. Pool in “Tres Zapotes: Where Olmec Archaeology Began,” in *Olmec, Colossal Masterworks of Ancient Mexico*, edited by K. Berrin and V. Fields, pp. 55–67, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2010). The catalog *El Museo Amparo: Colección prehispánica*, Puebla, Mexico (1993), contains a photograph (illustration 34) and description (pp. 82–83) of the head, but incorrectly attributes it to La Venta.

Chapter 4. Stone Heads in the Jungle (1940)

The events and discoveries of the Stirlings’ initial ten-day visit to La Venta are narrated primarily in Matt’s 1940 article “Great Stone Faces of the Mexican Jungle,” *National Geographic Magazine* 78:309–334 (1940). The carved stones uncovered during that visit are more thoroughly described in M. Stirling, *Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 138, Smithsonian Institution (1943).

Chapter 5. Fortuitous Decisions at La Venta (1942–1943)

The Second World War delayed the analysis and publication of the 1942 and 1943 La Venta excavations until 1952, at which time Phil Drucker’s *La Venta, Tabasco: A Study of Olmec Ceramics and Art*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 153, Smithsonian Institution, was published. Drucker’s 1942 surface collections, test pits, and stratigraphic trenches are discussed on pages 4–22, while his research in Complex A (“Structural Investigations”) is discussed on pages 22–79. The publication also includes a section authored by Waldo Wedel, “Structural Investigations in 1943,” pages 34–79, that discusses the excavations, the discovery of the mosaic mask beneath the Southeast Platform, and the large crypt uncovered in Mound A-3. The remainder of the monograph deals with ceramics and art, including the stone carvings. A few of the monuments uncovered in 1942 are also described by M. Stirling in *Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 138, Smithsonian Institution (1943). The 1942 field season is likewise a topic of the Stirlings’ “Finding Jewels of Jade in a Mexican Swamp,” *National Geographic Magazine* 82 (5):635–661 (1942). Matt’s article “La Venta’s Green Stone Tigers,” *National Geographic Magazine* 80:321–332 (1943), highlights the 1943 field season’s finds.

Drucker’s opinion that the human remains in the columnar basalt tomb

comprised two “bundle burials” appears on page 23 of *La Venta, Tabasco: A Study of Olmec Ceramics and Art*. Stirling’s belief that there had been “three persons” was published ten years earlier in his “Finding Jewels of Jade in a Mexican Swamp,” *National Geographic Magazine* 82(5), p. 640. The gendering of particular Preclassic period artifact categories, and particularly those at La Venta, is discussed on pages 43–48 and Table 2 of Rosemary Joyce’s book *Gender and Power in Prehispanic Mesoamerica*, University of Texas Press, Austin (2001).

Information on the regrettable demise of the sandstone sarcophagus, Tomb B/Monument 6, occurs in correspondence in the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) archives in Mexico City.

Chapter 6. Monuments on the Río Chiquito (1945–1946)

An account of Matt and Marion Stirling’s 1945 trek to San Lorenzo and of the 1946 fieldwork there is found in “On the Trail of La Venta Man,” *National Geographic Magazine* 91:137–172. The stone carvings documented during that research are presented in *Stone Monuments of the Río Chiquito, Veracruz*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 157, pp. 1–23, Smithsonian Institution (1955). Although Stirling and Drucker did not publish a formal report on the 1946 excavations, Michael Coe and Richard Diehl provide a useful summary of the 1946 research on pages 33–37 of their book *In the Land of the Olmec*, vol. 1, *The Archaeology of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*, University of Texas Press, Austin (1980).

The role that Marion Stirling indirectly played in the “discovery” of San Lorenzo appears on page 8 of her book chapter “An Intimate View of Archaeological Exploration,” in *The Olmec and Their Neighbors*, edited by E. Benson, pp. 1–13, *Dumbarton Oaks*, Washington, DC (1981), as well as on page 32 of A. Cyphers and L. Morales-Cano’s book chapter “Community Museums in the San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Region, Mexico,” in *Archaeological Site Museums in Latin America*, edited by H. Silverman, pp. 31–46, University of Florida Press, Gainesville (2006).

Chapter 7. The Return to La Venta (1955)

The major publication for the 1955 La Venta research is *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 170, Smithsonian Institution (1959), authored by P. Drucker, R. Heizer, and R. Squier. The original radiocarbon dates are reported on pages 264–267 of that publication and by the same authors in “Radiocarbon Dates from La Venta, Tabasco,” *Science* 126:72–73 (1957). The revised dating a decade later was published by R. Berger, J. Graham, and R. Heizer in “A Reconsideration of the Age of the La Venta Site,” *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility* 3:1–24 (1967).

The archaeologists’ bulldozer trench is mentioned on pages 4–5 and 17 of *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955*, while the post-project damage to Complex A caused by petroleum-related activities received comment in several sources, including on pages 62–63 of P. Drucker and R. Heizer’s “Commentary

on W. R. Coe and Robert Stuckenrath's Review of *Excavations at La Venta Tabasco, 1955*," *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers* 33:37–70, University of California (1965). The pre-excavation adobe brick tests at the Heizer residence are mentioned in correspondence between Drucker and Heizer preserved in the R. F. Heizer Archives, Bancroft Library, University of California–Berkeley. Those archives also contain letters between Heizer and Matthew Stirling regarding Drucker's unexpected departure for Mexico and its consequences.

Chapter 8. Of Monuments and Museums (1963, 1968)

The major details regarding the removal of Colossal Head 2 and the theft of the stone jaguar come from a chapter authored by J. J. Sweeney, "A Head from San Lorenzo," in the exhibition catalog *The Olmec Tradition*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (1963; the catalog's pages are unnumbered). Although the chapter identifies the stolen stone jaguar as San Lorenzo Monument 7, there is little doubt that instead it was Tenochtitlán Monument 2 (see Coe and Diehl, *In the Land of the Olmec*, vol. 1, *The Archaeology of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*, pp. 372, University of Texas Press, Austin [1980]). The carving was eventually recovered and is now in the anthropology museum in Xalapa. Medellín's removal of the stone statue from the San Martín Pajapan volcano is discussed in his article, "El dios jaguar de San Martín," *INAH Boletín* 33:9–16, Mexico City (1968).

Chapter 9. Adding Antiquity to the Olmecs (1966–1968)

The principal source on Coe and Diehl's research at San Lorenzo is their two-volume book, *In the Land of the Olmec*, University of Texas Press, Austin (1980). The archaeological excavations, artifact analyses, and a well-illustrated catalog of the stone monuments is provided in vol. 1, *The Archaeology of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*. Vol. 2, *People of the River*, discusses the project's ecological research and provides a basic ethnography of the local population at the time the research was carried out. Four excellent large maps, including R. Krotser's important "Archaeological Map of San Lorenzo," accompany the two volumes.

Michael Coe has published extensively on different aspects of the research, including "Solving a Monumental Mystery," *Discovery* 3:21–26 (1967); "San Lorenzo and the Olmec civilization," *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec*, E. Benson, ed., pp. 41–71, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC (1968); "The Archaeological Sequence at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, Veracruz, Mexico," *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility*, 8:21–34 (1970); "Photogrammetry and the Ecology of Olmec Civilization," edited by E. Vogt, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (1974); "Gift of the River: Ecology of the San Lorenzo Olmec," in *The Olmec and Their Neighbors*, edited by E. Benson, pp. 15–20, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC (1981); and "San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán," *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 1: *Archaeology*, edited by J. Sabloff, pp. 117–146, University of Texas Press, Austin (1981). A brief overview in Spanish of some of the research can be found on pages 173–180 of Francisco Beverido's article "Breve historia de la arque-

ología olmeca,” *La Palabra y el Hombre* 64:161–194, Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa (1987).

Chapter 10. Research Headaches at La Venta (1967–1969)

The discoveries and unfortunate problems of the 1967 and 1968 research at La Venta are discussed in R. Heizer’s 1968 chapter, “New Observations on La Venta,” *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec*, edited by E. Benson, pp. 9–36, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC (1968); R. Heizer, P. Drucker, and J. Graham, “Investigations at La Venta, 1967,” *Contributions of the University of California Archaeology Research Facility* 5:1–33 (1968); and R. Heizer, J. Graham, and L. Napton, “The 1968 Investigations at La Venta,” *Contributions of the University of California Archaeology Research Facility* 5:127–154 (1968).

Most of those articles also include comments on the shape of the La Venta pyramid, as does R. Heizer and P. Drucker’s article “The Fluted Pyramid of the La Venta Site,” *Antiquity* 42:52–56 (1968). Slightly more recent observations on the pyramid mound can be found in J. Graham and M. Johnson, “The Great Mound at La Venta,” *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility* 41:1–5 (1979), and R. González, “Acerca de pirámides de tierra y seres sobrenaturales: Observaciones preliminares en torno al Edificio C-1, La Venta, Tabasco,” *Arqueología* 17:79–97, INAH, Mexico City (1997). The magnetometer survey of the pyramid is detailed in F. Morrison, C. Clewlow, and R. Heizer, “Magnetometer Survey of the La Venta Pyramid,” *Contributions of the University of California Archaeology Research Facility* 8:1–20 (1970), and F. Morrison, J. Benavente, C. Clewlow, and R. Heizer, “Magnetometer Evidence of a Structure within the La Venta Pyramid,” *Science* 167:1488–1490 (1970).

The stone monuments unearthed in 1968 are documented in C. Clewlow and C. Corson, “New Stone Monuments from La Venta, 1968,” *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility* 5:171–182 (1968).

Chapter 11. Reclaiming La Venta (1984 to the Present)

Major details of the La Venta Archaeological Project (PALV) are in Spanish: R. González, “Proyecto arqueológico La Venta,” *Arqueología* 4:121–165, INAH, Mexico City (1968), and L. Barba, “Trabajos de prospección realizados en el sitio arqueológico La Venta, Tabasco,” *Arqueología* 4:167–218, INAH, Mexico City (1998). Rebecca González has also authored several good summaries of La Venta in both English and Spanish, including “La Venta: An Olmec Capital,” in *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*, edited by E. Benson and B. de la Fuente, pp. 73–81, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (1996); and “La Venta, a Great Olmec City,” *Arqueología Mexicana*, special edition in English entitled “Olmecs,” pp. 42–47, Editorial Raíces/INAH, Mexico City (1996); and “La antigua ciudad olmeca en La Venta, Tabasco,” in *Los olmecas en Mesoamérica*, edited by J. Clark, pp. 93–111, Citibank, Mexico City (1994).

Evidence of early settlements and wetland agriculture on the periphery of La

Venta is discussed in W. Rust and R. Sharer, "Olmec Settlement Data from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico," *Science* 242:102–104 (1988); W. Rust and B. Leyden, "Evidence of Maize Use at Early and Middle Preclassic La Venta Olmec Sites," in *Corn and Culture in the Prehistoric New World*, edited by S. Johannessen and C. Hastorf, pp. 181–201, Westview Press, Boulder (1994); M. Pohl, "Economic Foundations of Olmec Civilization in the Gulf Coast Lowlands of México," report to FAMSI, on-line (2001), <http://www.famsi.org/reports/99069/index.html>; and M. Pohl, "Olmec Civilization at San Andrés, Tabasco, México," report to FAMSI, on-line (2005), <http://www.famsi.org/reports/01047/index.html>.

Drucker's comment about "long narrow peninsulas" occurs in P. Drucker, *La Venta, Tabasco: A Study of Olmec Ceramics and Art*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 153, Smithsonian Institution (1952), page 6, and the "peninsulas" can be seen in the fig. 1 map.

The publication by Beatriz de la Fuente, *Escultura monumental olmeca: Catálogo*, UNAM, Mexico City (1973), remains the best published catalog of La Venta's stone monuments. It documents Monuments 1–75, but of course lacks the carvings uncovered by Heizer's 1968 project and the more recent PALV discoveries.

Chapter 12. San Lorenzo Yields New Secrets (1990–2012, Part 1)

The major reports on the San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project's research are being published in Spanish. Furthermore, much of the data from the research is still in preparation or in press. In addition to published sources, I derived some of the material in this chapter from my various visits to the site to see Ann Cyphers and to view her research, and also from innumerable conversations with her regarding San Lorenzo and the Olmecs.

General articles in English on the site by Ann Cyphers include "Reconstructing Olmec Life at San Lorenzo," in *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*, edited by E. Benson and B. de la Fuente, pp. 61–72, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (1996); "Recent Discoveries at San Lorenzo," *Arqueología Mexicana*, special edition in English entitled "Olmecs," pp. 56–59, Editorial Raíces/INAH, Mexico City (1996); "San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, Veracruz, Mexico," in *The Archaeology of Ancient Mexico and Central America: An Encyclopedia*, edited by S. Evans and D. Webster, pp. 645–649, Garland, New York (2001); "San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, edited by D. Carrasco, pp. 120–122, Oxford University Press, New York (2001); and "San Lorenzo," in *Olmec, Colossal Masterworks of Ancient Mexico*, edited by K. Berrin and V. Fields, pp. 34–43, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2010).

Lagunas, *barranca* erosion, and architecture are all discussed in A. Cyphers, "Olmec Architecture at San Lorenzo," in *Olmec to Aztec, Settlement Patterns in the Ancient Gulf Lowlands*, edited by B. Stark and P. Arnold, pp. 96–114, University of Arizona Press, Tucson (1997), and in A. Cyphers and A. di Castro, "Early Olmec Architecture and Imagery," in *The Art of Urbanism*, edited by W. Fash and L. López Luján, pp. 21–52, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC (2009). Monument context and the Monument 14 area excavations are the topic

of A. Cyphers, "From Stone to Symbols: Olmec Art in Social Context at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán," in *Social Patterns in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica*, edited by D. Grove and R. Joyce, pp. 155–182, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC (1999); and A. Cyphers and A. di Castro, "Early Olmec Architecture and Imagery," in *The Art of Urbanism*, edited by W. Fash and L. López Luján, pp. 21–52, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC (2009).

The site's 134 recorded monuments and carvings, and also those from several nearby related sites, are very nicely cataloged and illustrated in A. Cyphers, *Escultura olmeca de San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*, UNAM, Mexico City (2004). The discovery of Colossal Head 10 and a politician's accusation that Ann Cyphers had stolen an eleventh colossal head at that time is briefly mentioned in A. Cyphers and L. Morales-Cano, "Community Museums in the San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Region, Mexico," in *Archaeological Site Museums in Latin America*, edited by H. Silverman, pp. 31–46, University of Florida Press, Gainesville (2006).

Chapter 13. El Manatí: "Like Digging in Warm Jell-O" (1987–1993)

The primary reference source for the research at El Manatí is the Spanish-language monograph authored by Ponciano Ortiz, Carmen Rodríguez, and Alfredo Delgado, *Las investigaciones arqueológicas en el Cerro Sagrado Manatí*, Universidad Veracruzana and INAH, Xalapa (1997). It describes the investigations and has good photos and illustrations of the wooden busts, clusters of offerings, and some rubber balls. The baptism and naming of the sculptures is mentioned on page 55. Publications in English by P. Ortiz and C. Rodríguez include "Olmec Ritual and Sacred Geography at Manatí," in *From Olmec to Aztec: Settlement Patterns in the Ancient Gulf Lowlands*, edited by B. Stark and P. Arnold, pp. 68–95, University of Arizona Press, Tucson (1997); "Olmec Ritual Behavior at El Manatí: A Sacred Space," in *Social Patterns in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica*, edited by D. Grove and R. Joyce, pp. 225–254, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC (1999); and "The Sacred Hill of El Manatí: A Preliminary Discussion of the Site's Ritual Paraphernalia," in *Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica*, edited by J. Clark and M. Pye, pp. 75–93, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2000).

The first hostage incident is described in Spanish by project participant Dr. Paul Schmidt in "El progreso es cuadrado," *Humanidades* 11:1–2, UNAM, Mexico City (1991). Some information on El Manatí comes from my conversations with various project participants.

Chapter 14. "They're Blowing Up the Site!" Tres Zapotes after Stirling (1950–2003)

The reasons behind the unfortunate demise of the Tuxtla Olmec Project remain unclear. F. Beverido's contributions to that project, including the discovery of the Cobata head and the Stela C incident are discussed on pages 184–190

of his article “Breve historia de la arqueología olmeca,” *La Palabra y el Hombre* 64:161–194, Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa (1987). The question of whether the Cobata head is an unfinished carving is raised by N. Hammond, “The Cobata Colossal Head: An Unfinished Olmec Monument?” *Antiquity* 75:21–22 (2001). Publications on the conflicting views regarding the naming of the second colossal head at Tres Zapotes are as follows: “Nestepe 1”: C. Clewlow et al., “Colossal Heads of the Olmec Culture,” *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility* 4 (1967), p. 30; “Head 2”: R. Heizer, T. Smith, and H. Williams, “Notes on Colossal Head No. 2 from Tres Zapotes,” *American Antiquity* 31:102–104 (1965); and “Monument Q”: M. Stirling, “Monumental Sculpture of Southern Veracruz and Tabasco,” *Handbook of Middle American Indians* 3:716–738, University of Texas, Austin (1965), p. 733. Although decades out of date, M. Stirling’s *Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 138, Smithsonian Institution (1943), and B. de la Fuente’s *Escultura monumental olmeca: Catalogo*, UNAM, Mexico City (1973) nonetheless remain the best catalogs of the site’s stone monuments.

An overview of the RATZ research can be found in C. Pool’s edited monograph *Settlement Archaeology and Political Economy at Tres Zapotes, Veracruz, Mexico*, Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Monograph 50, University of California–Los Angeles (2003), and C. Pool’s book chapter “From Olmec to Epi-Classic at Tres Zapotes, Veracruz, Mexico,” in *Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica*, edited by J. Clark and M. Pye, pp. 137–153, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2000). A brief summary is also found on pp. 254–256 of Pool’s book *Olmec Archaeology and Early Mesoamerica*, Cambridge University Press, New York (2007). Dr. Pool and RATZ student participants very generously—and eagerly—provided many stories for this chapter.

Chapter 15. An Olmec Stone Quarry and a Sugarcane Crisis (1991)

Mineralogical studies linking basalt monuments at La Venta and San Lorenzo to stone sources in the Tuxtla Mountains are found in M. Coe and R. Diehl, *In the Land of the Olmec*, vol. 1: *The Archaeology of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*, University of Texas Press, Austin (1980), and H. Williams and R. Heizer, “Sources of Rock Used in Olmec Monuments,” *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility* 1:1–39 (1965).

Unfortunately, Alfonso Medellín did not publish a formal report on his work at Laguna de los Cerros or on his brief investigations at Llano del Jícaro. However, he provides an overview of both in his article “Monolitos inéditos olmecas,” *La Palabra y el Hombre* 16:75–97, Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa (1960). Susan Gillespie’s research is documented in “Llano del Jícaro: An Olmec monument workshop,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 5:223–242, and “Monuments of Laguna de los Cerros and Its Hinterland,” in *Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica*, edited by J. Clark and M. Pye, pp. 95–115, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2000). The La Isla statue head and the El Cardonal carving are both illustrated in the latter. The El Cardonal statue and several other monuments recorded during the research are discussed in D. Grove et al., “Five Ol-

mec Monuments from the Laguna de los Cerros Hinterland,” *Mexicon* 15:91–95, Berlin (1993). The La Isla research is summarized in D. Grove, “La Isla, Veracruz, 1991: A Preliminary Report with Comments on the Olmec Uplands,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 5:223–230 (1994).

Chapter 16. Discoveries Large and Small at San Lorenzo (1990–2012, Part 2)

The main publication for the regional survey data, with maps and charts, is in Spanish: S. Symonds, A. Cyphers, and R. Lunagómez, *Asentamiento prehispánico en San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*, UNAM, Mexico City (2002). Included in that publication is information on *islotas* and an appendix on the diagnostic ceramic types over time. A shorter discussion in English, with maps, is S. Symonds and R. Lunagómez, “Settlement System and Population Development at San Lorenzo,” in *From Olmec to Aztec: Settlement Patterns in the Ancient Gulf Lowlands*, edited by B. Stark and P. Arnold, pp. 144–173, University of Arizona Press, Tucson (1997). The area’s riverine setting, subsistence and *islotas*, transportation and communication routes, and regional hierarchy are considered in A. Cyphers and J. Zurita-Noguera, “A Land That Tastes of Water,” in *Pre-columbian Water Management*, edited by L. Lucero and B. Fash, pp. 33–50, University of Arizona Press, Tucson (2006).

The SLTAP’s ilmenite discoveries and studies are discussed in A. Cyphers and A. di Castro, “Los artefactos multiperforados de ilmenita en San Lorenzo,” *Arqueología* 16:3–14, INAH, Mexico City (1996), and A. di Castro, “Los bloques de ilmenita de San Lorenzo,” in *Población, subsistencia y medio ambiente en San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*, edited by A. Cyphers, pp. 153–160, UNAM, Mexico City (1997).

The creation of the museum in the village of Tenochtitlán is discussed in A. Cyphers and L. Morales-Cano, “Community Museums in the San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Region, Mexico,” in *Archaeological Site Museums in Latin America*, edited by H. Silverman, pp. 31–46, University of Florida Press, Gainesville (2006).

Chapter 17. The Night the Lights Went Out (2001)

The El Azuzul sculptures are described in A. Cyphers and F. Botas, “An Olmec Feline Sculpture from El Azuzul, Southern Veracruz,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 138(2):273–283, Philadelphia (1994); A. Cyphers, “From Stone to Symbols: Olmec Art in Social Context at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán,” in *Social Patterns in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica*, edited by D. Grove and R. Joyce, pp. 155–182, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC (1999); and the San Lorenzo monument catalog, A. Cyphers, *Escultura olmeca de San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*, UNAM, Mexico City (2004), pages 246–252.

Some of the events related to the disappearance of the carvings are mentioned in A. Cyphers and L. Morales-Cano, “Community Museums in the San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Region, Mexico,” *Archaeological Site Museums in*

Latin America, edited by H. Silverman, pp. 31–46, University of Florida Press, Gainesville (2006), while others were told to me by people familiar with the episode.

Chapter 18. Some Thoughts on the Archaeology of the Olmecs

Much of the commentary in this chapter is based upon data already mentioned and cited in previous chapters, and those citations will not be repeated here.

Non-Olmec centers that began creating Olmec-like stone carvings after c. 800 BC include Chalcatzingo, Morelos, and Teopantecuanitlan, Guerrero, in Central Mexico; Pijijiapan, Chiapas; La Blanca and Takalik Abaj, Guatemala; and Chalchuapa, El Salvador.

The Olmecs' use of bitumen is discussed in C. Wendt and A. Cyphers, "How the Olmec Used Bitumen in Ancient Mesoamerica," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 27:175–191 (2008). Trace element analyses of obsidian from San Lorenzo are presented in R. Cobean et al., "Obsidian Trade and San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán," *Science* 174:666–671 (1971); R. Cobean et al., "High-Precision Trace-Element Characterization of Major Mesoamerican Obsidian Sources and Further Analysis of Artifacts from San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, Mexico," *Latin American Antiquity* 2:69–91 (1991); and K. Hirth et al., "Early Obsidian Trade and Economic Organization at San Lorenzo," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 40:2784–2798 (2013).

The antiquity of ball games in the Americas is discussed by S. Gillespie in "Ballgames and Boundaries," in *The Mesoamerican Ballgame*, edited by V. Scarborough and D. Wilcox, pp. 317–345, University of Arizona Press, Tucson (1991).

Discussion of the colossal stone heads as portrait carvings and their head-dress motifs as identifiers is found in M. Coe, "Olmec and Maya: A Study in Relationships," in *The Origins of Maya Civilization*, edited by R. Adams, pp. 183–195, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque; and in D. Grove, "Olmec Monuments: Mutilation as a Clue to Meaning," in *The Olmec and Their Neighbors*, edited by E. Benson, pp. 49–68, *Dumbarton Oaks*, Washington, DC (1981). Susan Gillespie's insight concerning so-called helmet headdresses occurs as footnote 10 in her book chapter "The Monuments of Laguna de los Cerros and Its Hinterland," in *Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica*, edited by J. Clark and M. Pye, pp. 95–115, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2000). The notion that the massive stone "altars" functioned as thrones was first proposed by me in "Olmec Altars and Myths," *Archaeology* 26:128–135 (1973). The Oxtotitlán cave mural upon which that interpretation is based is discussed in D. Grove, "The Olmec Paintings of Oxtotitlán Cave, Guerrero, Mexico," *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology* 6, *Dumbarton Oaks*, Washington, DC (1970). The two different types of altar-thrones are discussed in D. Grove, "Public Monuments and Sacred Mountains: Observations on Three Formative Period Sacred Landscapes," in *Social Patterns in Preclassic Mesoamerica*, edited by D. Grove and R. Joyce, pp. 255–299, *Dumbarton Oaks*, Washington, DC (1999).

The most complete commentary in English on how Olmec stone carvings might have been moved across the landscape is J. Velson and T. Clark, "Transport of Stone Monuments to the La Venta and San Lorenzo Sites," *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility* 24:1–39 (1975). A more recent and thorough article, but in Spanish, is R. Diehl, "De cómo los reyes olmecas obtenían sus cabezas colosales," in *Mesoamérica: Debates y perspectivas*, edited by E. Williams et al., pp. 183–197, El Colegio de Michoacán, Zamora (2011). The identification of riverside causeways and ramps is discussed in A. Cyphers, "Olmec Architecture at San Lorenzo," in *Olmec to Aztec*, edited by B. Stark and P. Arnold, pp. 96–114, University of Arizona Press, Tucson (1997).

The intentional breakage of the stone monuments is the topic of my chapter, "Olmec Monuments: Mutilation as a Clue to Meaning," in *The Olmec and Their Neighbors*, edited by E. Benson, pp. 49–68, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC (1981). The probable link between La Venta Head 4 and a personage shown on San Lorenzo Monument 14 is posited in that same chapter. James Porter's valuable insight on monument recarving is found in J. Porter, "Olmec Colossal Heads as Recarved Thrones," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 17–18:23–29 (1989).

Index

Note: *Italic* page numbers refer to illustrations.

- Beverido, Francisco "Paco," 82, 128, 130
 Blom, Frans, 5–6, 8–13
 Cobata colossal head, 128–129, *129*, 174
 Coe, Michael, 80–82, *81*, 89, 105
 Cyphers, Ann, 104–107, 109–111, *154*, 164–165, 179
 Drucker, Philip: at La Venta, 37–44, 60, 62, 66–68, 90–92, 103; at San Lorenzo, 53, 55, 56–60, 66–68; at Tres Zapotes, 27
 El Azuzul sculptures, 161–165, *162*, *163*, *164*
 El Cardonal sculpture, 147, *149*
 El Macayal, 116–121, 124
 El Manatí/Cerro Manatí, 117–120; excavations, 120–124, *123*; greenstone celts, 118, 120, 124, *124*; rubber balls, 119, *119*, *124*; wooden busts, 117, *118*, 120–124, *122*
 Gillespie, Susan, 138, 140–141, 174
 González, Rebecca, 99–100, 102
 Graham, John, 90, 92, 93, 102
 greenstone/jade, 1, 12, 173; at La Venta, 35, 42–46, 48, 64
 Grove, David, vii, 138, *141*, 146–147, *149*, 175
 Heizer, Robert, 56–57, *65*, 67–68, 90, 92, 93, 98
 Hueyapan colossal head, *19*, 21
 Hueyapan de Ocampo, 138–140
 jade. *See* greenstone/jade
 Krotser, Ray, 85, *86*
 La Farge, Oliver, 5–6, 8–13
 Laguna de los Cerros, 167–169, 175
 La Isla, 138; excavations, 146–148; "were-jaguar" head, *149*, 150
 La Venta, 13, *14*, *15*, 16, 31–36, 37, 56–68, 90, 99; Altar 4, *14*, 34–35; Altar 5, 33–35, 33, 34; aqueduct, 97, 98; bulldozing of, by Pemex, 58–59, 58, 66–67; Ceremonial Court, 45; Colossal Head 1, *14*, 35; Colossal Heads 2–4, 36; Complex A, 38, 56–67; Complex B, 93, *102*; Complex C, 38; and La Venta Archaeological Project (PALV), 99–103; and magnetometer project, 98; maps of, *15*, *39*, *94*; Massive Offerings, 62–64; Monument 6 (Tomb B), 41–

La Venta (*continued*)

- 42, 41, 44; Monument 7 (Tomb A), 40–43, 40, 43; Monument 25/26, 100; Monument 27, 101; Monument 44, 96; Mound A-2, 38, 40; Mound A-3, 48; Mound C (pyramid), 16, 38, 91, 92–93, 100, 102; Offering 4, 64, 65; pseudo-burials, 35, 45, 48; radiocarbon dates from, 66, 91; Southeast Platform's buried mosaic pavement, 46–47, 47; Southwest Platform's buried mosaic pavement, 60, 61; Stela 2, 102, 177; Stirling Acropolis, 95; Villa La Venta and, 91–92
- Llano del Jícaro, 138, 140–141, 141, 147–148; altar-throne, 141–143, 142; channel stones, 141, 144, 145; disks, 144, 145; Monument 8 (Laguna de los Cerros) 143, 143; and Proyecto Llano del Jícaro (PLJ), 141–143
- Loma del Zapote, 55, 156, 161
- Long Count dates, 6, 7, 24
- Loya, Ismael, 11–12; and moving of San Martín Pajapan statue, 77–78
- Medellín, Alfonso, 69, 73–74, 75–77, 141–143
- monuments. *See* stone monuments
- Olman, 3, 3, 167–169; major centers in, 3, 168–169
- Olmecs: as an archaeological culture, 2–3; “collapse” of, 181–182; legacy of, 182; lifeways of, 170–174; origins of, 169–170
- Ortiz, Ponciano, 117, 120–121, 141
- Piedra Labrada statue and stela, 9, 10
- Pool, Chris, 131–137
- Potrero Nuevo, 55, 131
- Rodríguez, Maria del Carmen, 117, 120–121, 141
- San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, 51–52, 80, 104, 109–112; aqueducts, 54, 54, 86, 87, 88–89, 88a, 88b, 109–110, 113, 114; *barrancas*, 107–109; *chapapote*/bitumen, 172; chronological phases of, 84–85; Colossal Head 1, 52, 53, 174; Colossal Head 2, 52, 70, 71, 72, 180; Colossal Head 7, 180; Colossal Head 10, 107–109, 108, 159; houses, 110–113, 115; ilmenite cubes, 155–158, 155, 158; *islotes*, 152–153, 154; lagoons, 86, 110; magnetometer use at, 89, 104, 107; Monument 9, 54, 54; Monument 14, 52, 53; Monument 34, 81; Monument 52, 88–89, 88; plateau, size of, 52; reconnaissance at, 151–153; “Red Palace,” 112–113, 113, 114, 115; and Río Chiquito Project, 82–89; and San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project (SLTAP), 104–115, 151, 158–159
- San Martín Pajapan volcano, 8; statue on summit of, 8, 11–12, 12, 75–78, 76
- Schmidt, Paul, 121
- Squier, Robert, 57, 128, 130
- Stirling, Marion, 25, 26, 31–36, 50–54, 53
- Stirling, Matthew, 1–2, 37; at La Venta, 31–36, 37, 42, 44–47; at San Lorenzo, 50–55; at Tres Zapotes, 17–24, 27–30
- stone monuments: categories of, 174–175; mutilation of, 34, 180–181; production of, 143–144; symbolism of, 171, 174–178; transport of, 140, 178–179. *See also specific monuments under names of specific Olmec centers*
- Tenochtitlán village, 50–51, 55, 72–74, 104–105, 158–160; archaeological site, 82–84; community museum in, 158–160, 159; excavations, 84; Monuments 1 and 2, 51

- Tres Zapotes, 18, 20–22, 126–128, 130–136; Colossal Head 1 (Mon. A), 19, 21; Colossal Head 2 (Mon. Q), 126–127, 127; map of, 22; Monument H, 28, 29–30, 29*a*, 29*b*; Monument M, 28–29; radio-carbon dates from, 136; Stela C, 23, 25, 26, 28, 126, 127–128, 130, 131; and Tres Zapotes Archaeological Survey (RATZ), 131
- Tulane University Expedition to Middle America, 5–16
- Tuxtla Mountains, 3, 5–6, 40, 92, 128, 138–141, 167–168, 178–179; as source of basalt, 40, 89, 140–141
- Tuxtlas Olmec Project, 128, 130
- Tuxtla Statuette, 6, 7, 24
- Villa La Venta, 90–91, 91, 95, 100. *See also* La Venta
- Wedel, Waldo, 44–46, 47